August 1st

Adventure

Published Twice a Month

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A Jungle Mystery by ARTHUR O. FRIEL

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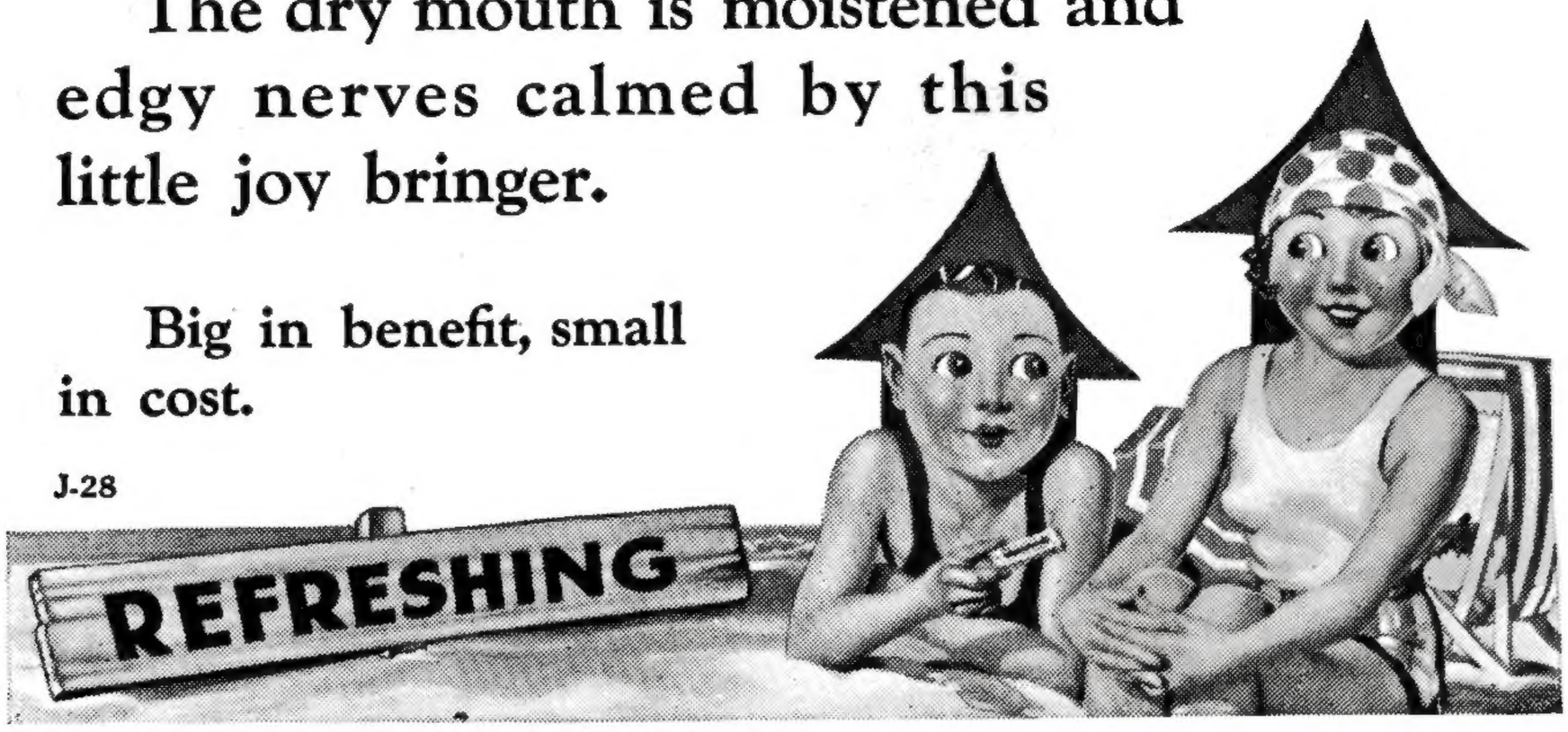

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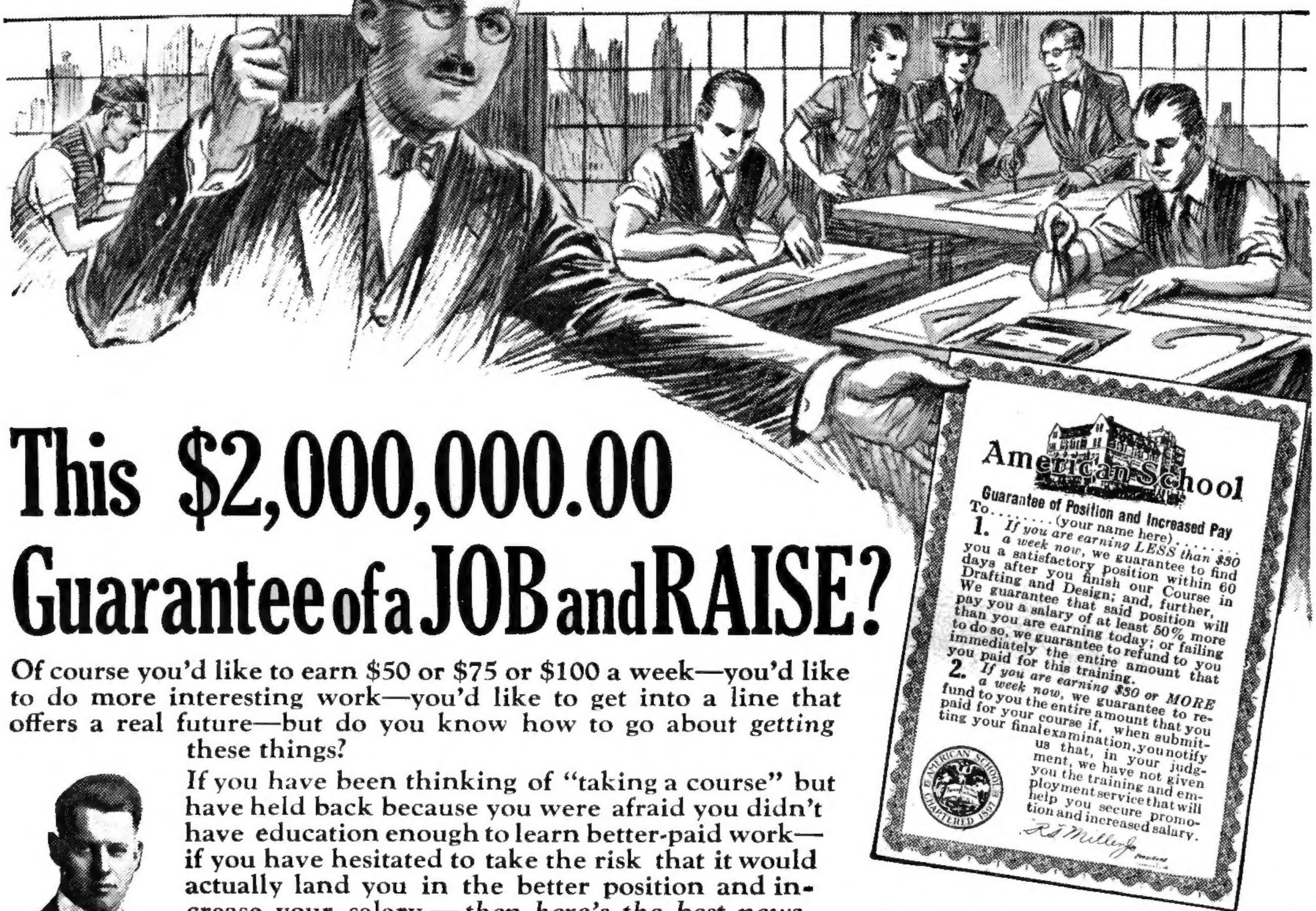

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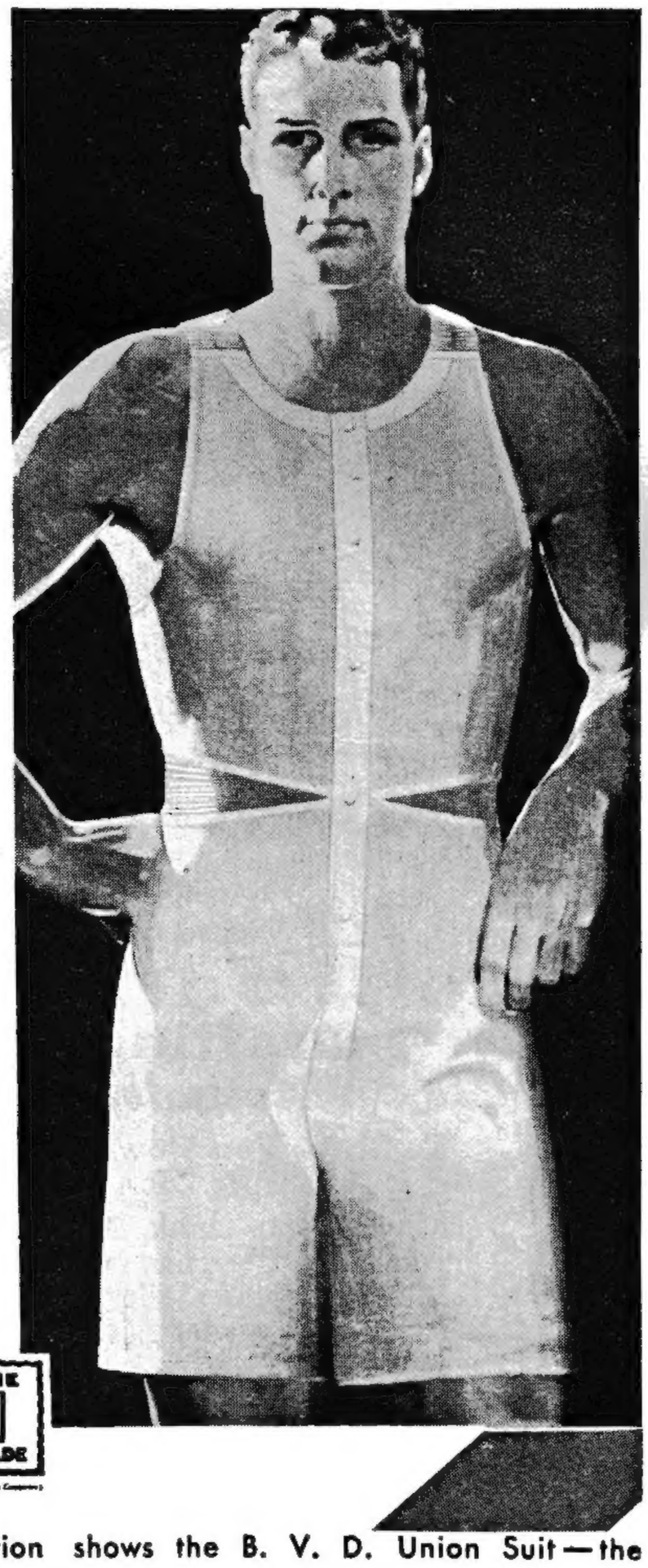

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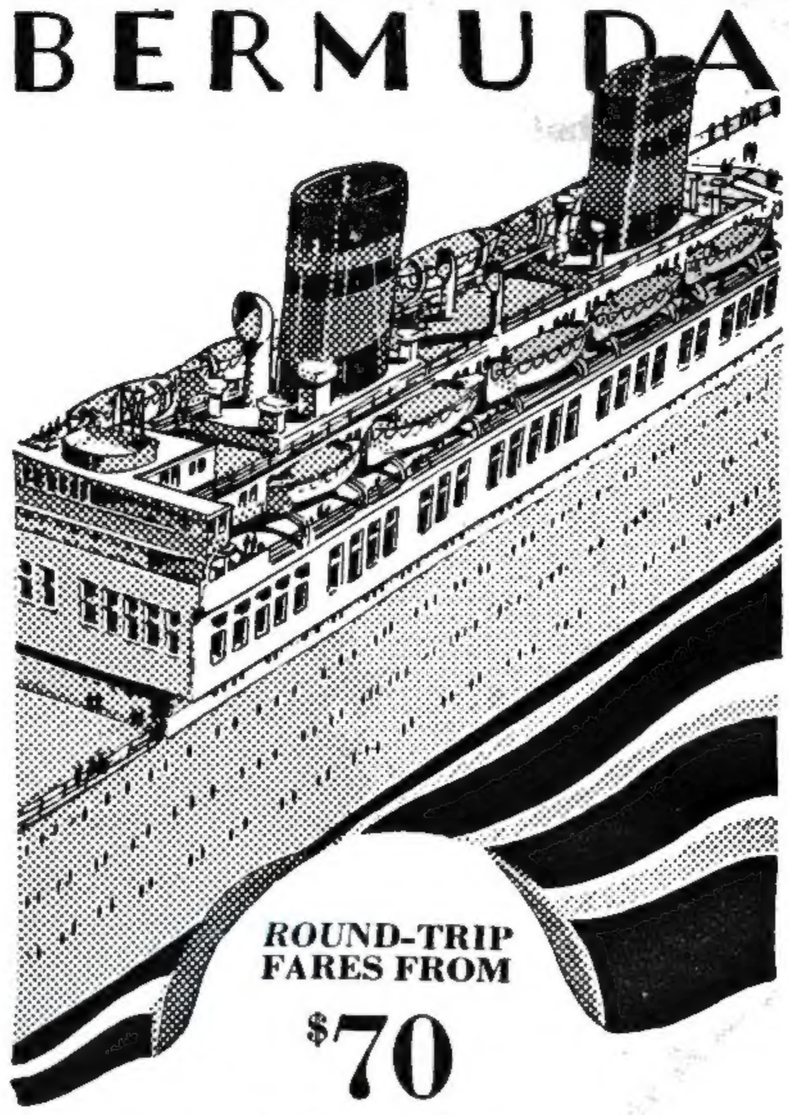

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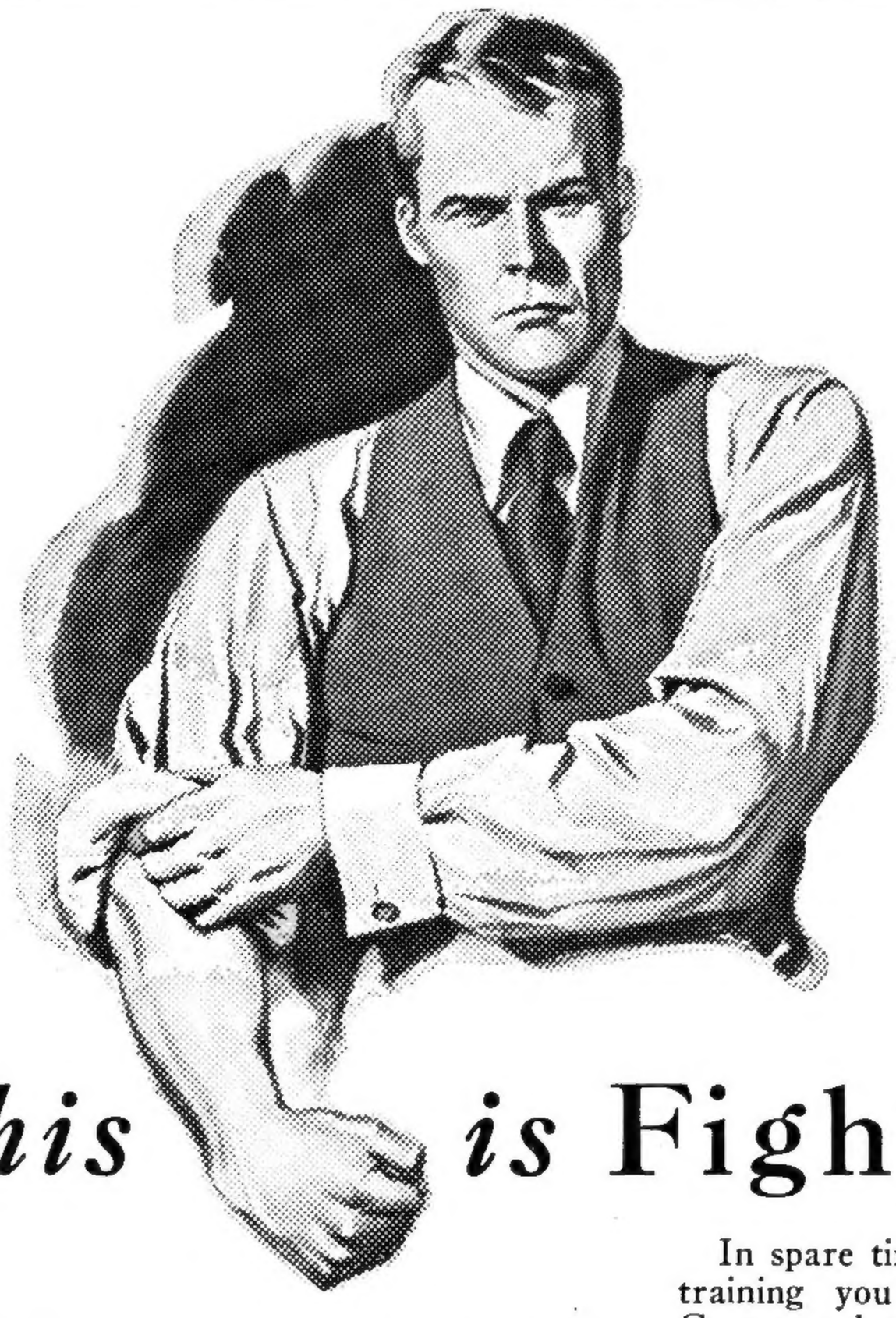
Volume 71 Number 4



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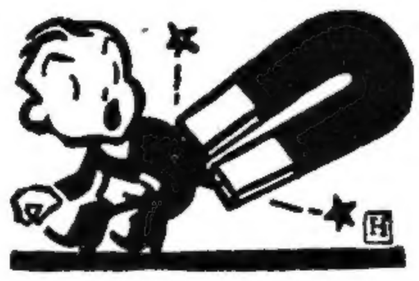

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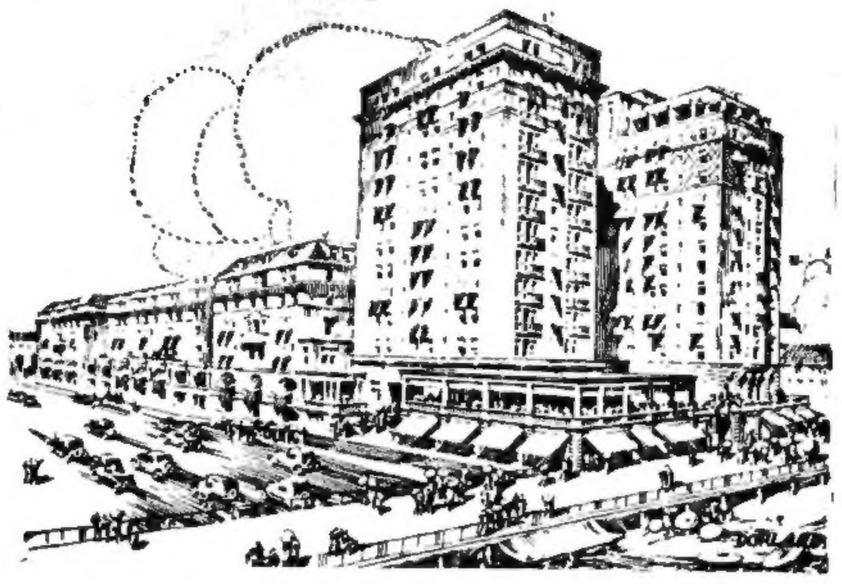

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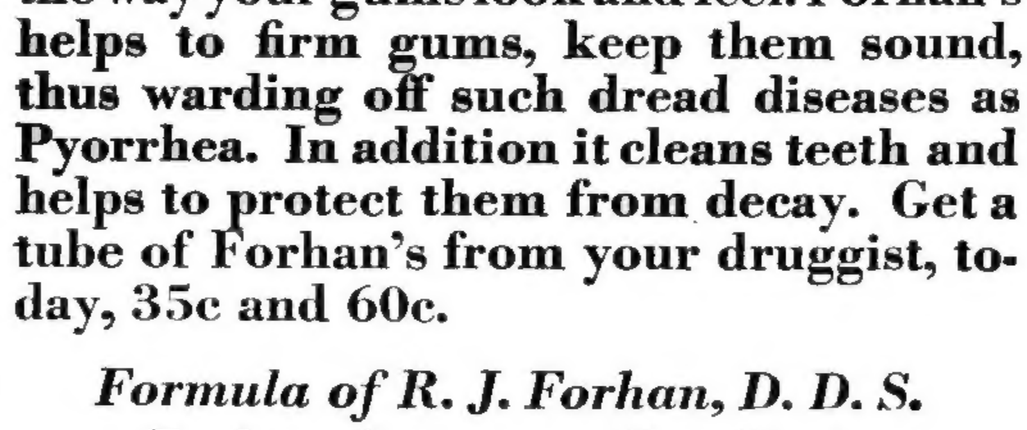

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Adventure

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Cover Design by Emmett Watson *Headings by Douglas Ryan*

Published twice a month by The Butterick Publishing Company, Butterick Building, New York, N. Y., U. S. A. Joseph A. Moore, Chairman of the Board; S. R. Latshaw, President; B. C. Dunklin, Secretary; Fred Lewis, Treasurer; Anthony M. Rud, Editor. Entered as Second Class Matter, October 1, 1910, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Chicago, Illinois. Yearly subscription $4.00 in advance. Single copy, Twenty-five Cents, in Canada Thirty Cents. Foreign postage, $2.00 additional. Canadian postage, 75 cents. Trade Mark Registered; Copyright, 1929, by The Butterick Publishing Company in the United States and Great Britain.

The Enchanted Hill

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

BUCK FLANAGAN, shooting his way out of a brawl forced on him in Texas, killed the vicious brother of a vindictive politician, and promptly went south.

Sheldon Thorne, nerve worn after a winter of Wall Street days and Broadway nights, took a sea voyage.

Felipe Rodriguez, who had thought General Francisco Serrano would be a better president than General Alvaro Obregón, left Mexico City in haste after Serrano was executed.

Mariquita, his daughter, went with him.

These unrelated movements of un-

A Complete Novel of Mexican Treasure which many sought, a few found, but from the quest of which no man returned

acquainted people might seem totally irrelevant. But, as some one sapiently observed a long time ago, this is a small world.

CHAPTER I

RESCUE

AN INDIAN and an armadillo stood at the curb outside the Hotel Regis, on Avenida Juarez, in Mexico City.

The Indian, sandaled, blue overalled, straw sombreroed, was mute as his little captive. The armadillo, greenish and grotesque, nosed slowly at the cement sidewalk, its triangular head and long tail drooping despondently, its armored body moving seldom. Grouped before both of these indigenes, a half score of American tourists and as many Mexican loiterers regarded the queer quadruped with varying degrees of curiosity. The silent Indian watched the foreigners with equal attention, seeking the possible purchaser.

His prospect of acquiring pesos from the Northerners seemed, however, decidedly poor. None of them looked like easy money. The clothing of the men showed lack of recent pressing, and dusty shoes needed polish. The women, though more neatly dressed, had the pinchpenny expressions of home economists. Already one of them was, unasked, decisively declaring herself.

"Well, I'm sure I don't want a thing like that round my house," she proclaimed.

"Aw, go on and buy him, Mrs. Watts," plagued the ready wit of the party. "Think what a hit you'd make up home, walkin' down Main Street with that feller on a chain. Har-har!"

Chuckles and giggles acknowledged his subtle humor. Repartee and badinage of equal brilliance ensued. The Indian and the Mexicans listened to the gabble, faintly interested but unamused. The armadillo looked all the more weary.

From the shady Alameda park, across the next corner, came two more Americans. The first, in rich Irish tweeds and expensive Panama hat, sauntered with a costly camera clasped under one arm and cigaret loosely riding between his fingers. The second, twenty feet behind, plodded in ankle boots, much washed khaki trousers, threadbare woolen coat, and slouchy felt hat; he carried nothing in his hands and, evidently, little in his pockets. An equal distance at the rear strolled a Mexico City policeman, natty in dark blue uniform and black army belt, nonchalantly smoking a native cigarro and outwardly oblivious of every one else on earth.

The first American was entirely unaware of the existence of the second. The second was ostensibly uninterested in the first. As for the officer, he might have had no curiosity concerning the trail worn Northerner whom he followed, and it might have been mere chance that caused him to lift his cigarro with his left hand, while his right hung idle beside his belted .45 pistol. However, the Mexico City police are by no means unaccustomed to the arrival of undesirable characters from the Western United States, nor slow in disposing of them at the first opportunity.

Through the trickle of other pedestrians the three walked in file. At the corner

of the park he first tossed aside his half smoked cigaret, glanced to right and left with the city man's habitual wariness against automobiles, and crossed the street. The second lengthened his stride, swooped sidewise, snatched up the discarded butt, puffed it avidly. The third quirked his dark lips in a saturnine smile.

The leader reached the grouped foreigners and natives. His blue eyes drifted over them in the metropolitan's casual survey of people unknown and uninteresting, then dropped sidewise to the armadillo. He paused, regarding the odd animal with mild curiosity. Somebody stepped before him, interfering with his view. He moved onward, circled the idlers, stopped at the curb, looking again at the captive.

The American in boots and khaki, still smoking the cast off cigaret, stood at the other side of the human arc, stolid and expressionless. The brown policeman, three yards behind, leaned against a lamp post and gazed at nothing in particular.

For a full minute the man in tweeds eyed the strange armored beast. Meanwhile the Indian, the Mexicans and some of the Americans eyed him in turn, all absorbing the beautiful tailoring of his suit, the fine weave and soft droop of his hat, the unostentatious but unmistakable richness of his whole attire. One or two noted also the experienced eyes, the firm nose, the good humored mouth, the tenacious jaw—and the recurrent twitch of jaw muscles and of eyelids betraying frayed nerves. The rest caught only the impression of wealth.

Interest sated, the late comer stepped backward, about to depart. But just then the watchful, hopeful Indian came out of his motionless pose. If the rich señor did not buy, nobody else would. That was clear. Therefore he sought to awaken desire of ownership.

Stooping, he dug hard fingers into the flexible body rings of his sluggish prize. Hurt, alarmed, the armadillo jumped, wriggled, took a few quick steps, displaying surprising activity. But then, with the stimulus removed, it slowed, stopped, drooped again.

The Indian looked expectantly at the wealthy *Americano*. That *Americano* looked keenly at the animal. Then he looked at the Indian, and his eyes hardened. He glanced aside at the other humans. Of nobody in particular he asked:

"What ails the little fellow? He acts sick."

His countrymen said nothing. A Mexican answered:

"He probably starve. That fellow maybe keep him a week, no feed."

The inquirer's lips thinned. For a few seconds longer he regarded the pathetic prisoner.

"Poor little devil!" he muttered. Then, in two strides, he confronted the captor.

"*Cuanto?*" he demanded, cold voiced.

"*Diez pesos*," promptly replied the hitherto wordless aborigine.

The other regarded him piercingly. From among the Mexicans came subdued mirth, indicating that ten pesos was much too high a price.

The aroused Northerner wasted no words in haggling. He dived a hand into a pocket, brought out a dozen silver pesos.

"*Cinco!*" he asserted. "Five! No more!"

With which he flipped five coins into the ready brown palm, stooped, grabbed up the armadillo. And, with the animal in his arms and camera jerking in one hand, he walked away toward the broad Paseo de la Reforma.

The armadillo, after a few startled kicks, became quiescent. The Indian, content with the price received, walked soundlessly away. The small crowd joked, laughed, disintegrated. The man in khaki dropped the butt now scorching his fingers and resumed trailing the man in tweeds. The man in blue flipped away his spent cigarro, carelessly touched the holster of his pistol, and moved after both the *Americanos*.

CHAPTER II

A TALE IS TOLD

"SAY, mister, what you goin' to do with the dilly?"

Buck Flanagan, forging alongside Sheldon Thorne at the beginning of the Paseo, spoke tonelessly. The buyer of the armadillo glanced at him quickly, coldly, with a touch of hostility. But after a direct look into the cool brown eyes of the intruder and another at his own queer burden he smiled in self-derision.

"That's what I've been wondering," he admitted.

"Well, if you can't use him I can."

"So? What'll you do with him?"

"Eat him."

The Easterner cast a surprised look down at the tough crusted animal, which looked anything but edible. Then he gave the stranger the skeptical survey of a man long inured to the wiles of panhandlers.

"You have a new line," he complimented. "But it won't work. I'm short myself. Hit up somebody else."

"Huh! Short? You?" The brown eyes swept the rich clothing.

"That's what I said, and what I mean."

"Huh!" The repetition expressed utter incredulity. "But all right, mister, all right. About this dilly, now, if I'll prove he's good eatin' will you give me half of him?"

Thorne paused, looking him squarely in the face. The policeman, close behind, stopped expectantly. This was what he had been awaiting. The American tramp had accosted the American señor, the señor now would order him harshly away, the rough fellow would retort nastily, and in the ensuing altercation the officer would arrest him for begging and disorderly conduct. If he resisted—well, cartridges were paid for by the government. If not, his identity and record could be ascertained after he was jailed. In either event there would be a notation to the officer's credit at headquarters.

But something slipped. The señor did not play his part. Instead, he stood a moment longer confronting the intruder, eyeing him inflexibly. Then he said:

"You win. Only you can't eat this little fellow. I've taken a fancy to him, and he's going to be fed and taken for a ride and turned loose. And you're going to eat steak and plenty more, and if your appetite doesn't measure up to your bluff you'll talk to the judge."

"Lead me to it," invited Flanagan.

"I will." Thorne's gaze strayed beyond him. "By the way," he added in the same tone, "there's a cop right behind you, and he looks hungry. He's not looking at this armadillo, either."

Flanagan's pupils shrank to pinpoints. His broad right hand moved an inch toward the left side of his coat, beneath which was a hard bulge. Then it sank back.

"It's up to you," he answered, his voice slightly strained.

"All right. Let's walk on to my hotel. Shall I give you the armadillo to carry? Maybe it would make the cop less suspicious."

"Thanks." The brown eyes, though still hard, shot a quick look of appreciation. "But I'd rather have my hands sort of loose."

"Uh-huh." Thorne smiled slightly. "Well, let's go."

They went side by side, keeping step. The Mexican stood still, scowling, fingering his gun, at a loss for his next move. After a minute or two he followed again, but more slowly.

Along the broad boulevard, built by an emperor as the approach to his castle, the oddly mated pair of Northerners marched to the Hotel Imperial. In at its unostentatious doorway they turned, and up its marble staircase they trod, and so they were gone. The trailing officer turned on his heel and retraced his way toward the Alameda. Tomorrow, he philosophically reflected, would be another day, and might bring better luck.

On the coldly formal first floor of the

Imperial, with its ornate furniture and gilt pillars, Flanagan stood just inside the revolving door, narrowly watching it. At the cage containing the business offices Thorne gave a grinning young Mexican incisive orders concerning the feeding and care of his protégé. His Spanish was meager, but insistent and effective. The youth volubly promised every attention to the animal. Assured of the comfort of the helpless brute, the American came back to his more recent adoption. As he came, he noted the sturdy legs, the powerful back, the heavy shoulders and strong neck beneath the drooping felt hat.

"A hard proposition to handle in a fight," he thought. "Tough as my armadillo—and a million times more dangerous."

Then, aloud:

"Come on. I want to see you eat."

"You won't need a microscope," promised Flanagan. "Where's the table?"

"Back at the Regis. The food's better there, and so is the service. I eat breakfast here, but nothing else. Go ahead."

The other went, wary but unhesitating. At the street entrance he relaxed perceptibly, the tautness going out of legs and arms. The blue uniform which he had more than half expected to find just outside was gone.

For a couple of blocks nothing was said. Flanagan looked straight ahead, plodding doggedly, with the mechanical gait of a man hardened to long leagues of footwork. His step seemed springless, however, and his heels dragged slightly. Thorne, covertly observant, felt more and more convinced that the request for the armadillo had been no mere bluff to extract a peso from him; that the man really needed meat.

His right hand slid surreptitiously into his money pocket, and the fingers estimated the number of coins bunched at the bottom. A wry smile flitted across his lips. Then, as they reached the little Plaza de Reforma and paused perforce to let motor traffic pass, he spoke.

"See that place over at the left of the horse statue? That's the National Lottery building. You really thought I was lying when I said I was short, didn't you? Well, I am short. And that's why."

Flanagan contemplated the wide two-story edifice on which flew the Mexican colors; then he plumbed the blue eyes.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Took a shot and missed?"

"Uh-huh," echoed the other. "And shot the whole works. The prize was half a million. Worth plunging for. Now I'm wondering how to pay my hotel bill Saturday. Come on. We can get across now."

They had gone another half block before Flanagan suggested—

"Send a telegram home."

"There's nobody home. Nobody but some brokers with a fat bill against me. The market crashed while I was at sea, and— Oh well, let's not spoil our appetites."

"Couldn't spoil mine if you throwed a fit. It's that strong."

"All right. You'll eat. So will I—until Saturday."

They approached the Regis, where nobody loitered at the moment. Flanagan obliqued toward the inviting entrance. His escort corrected him:

"Not there. We'll go to the lunch room, just ahead. The food is as good as in the grill, and there's more for the money."

"The more the better. Say when."

"Follow me."

A few yards beyond the wide portal, Thorne turned in at a narrow one, his convoy close at his heels. Within, at the right, was a long bar with stools; midway stood little tables; at the left were leather cushioned booths, snugly semi-private. Beside the door the bald, ruddy, white whiskered proprietor beamed at the tweed clad customer, then narrowed his gaze at the roughly dressed follower. Thorne paused.

"Good afternoon," he greeted. "Tell me, is an armadillo good to eat?"

"Eh? Armadillo, sir?" The old man looked surprised, then smiled genially.

"Oh, yes, truly. A fine fat armadillo well cooked, he is most—ah—*delicioso*, and much eaten in Mexico. I have none today, but perhaps tomorrow—"

"Thanks. We'll have some steak instead."

THE PAIR walked onward to a booth, sat, doffed hats. A grim smile stretched Flanagan's mouth.

"Satisfied now that I wasn't handin' you a line?" he asked.

"Sure. Now— Hello, waitress. Bring my friend a sirloin steak quick. *Comprende?* Sirloin steak—*largo—grande*— a big one."

"Seerlahn steck, *sí, señor,*" nodded the buxom waitress. "*Dos?*"

"No, not two. One—*uno*. And two bottles Moctezuma beer, double X. Hurry it up. *Muy pronto!*"

"*Sí, sí!*"

She moved away. Thorne passed a cigaret, lighted one for himself. Then the two men smoked and eyed each other in new inspection. All men look different without their hats.

The Easterner saw a blunt head, rumpled black hair, broad forehead, heavy brows, hard brown eyes, wide nostrils, steeltrap mouth, square jaw; in all, a tenacious, pugnacious face, set in somber lines, yet not ill natured. It was clean shaven and clean washed, and the hair over the close-set ears was inexpertly but painstakingly trimmed. Below the indomitable chin the yellow flannel shirt, minus a tie, was spotless and neatly buttoned. And the big hands resting on the table, one holding the cigaret, showed no dirt under the nails.

The Westerner viewed a long face and a tall brow, surmounted by light brown hair thin at the temples; blue eyes which might warm or chill with equal facility, and which showed lines at the corners and noticeable arcs beneath; sensitive lips, and pointed chin. Upon the whole countenance rested the faint cynicism brought by years of contact with a grasping, trust betraying, coldly commercialized world. And, though the shoulders under the perfect clothing were almost as wide as those of his vis-à-vis and the neck and chest showed inherent power, it was clear that the wear of that world had taken much more out of Thorne than the one known to Flanagan had drawn out of him. Yet it had not killed generous impulse. He had bought a useless armadillo, and now was feeding a useless man, when he was within three days of . . .

"Say!" blurted Flanagan. "If you're as short as you say, let's cut out that steak. We'll drink the beer, and I'll find my eats somewheres else."

The blue eyes warmed. But the answering tone was cool.

"Oh, no, you don't. I brought you here to eat, and you'll eat."

Flanagan's mouth hardened again. He said no more for some time. The beer came, and he drank. The steak came, and he devoured it in half masticated gulps. Other solid foods and another bottle of beer, quietly ordered by his host, arrived and went the way of the beef. Meanwhile Thorne himself ate an omelet and some pie. At last the Westerner sat back, gorged.

"I'm through," he admitted. "Satisfied?"

"You've done nobly," laughed Thorne. "Cigaret?"

"You bet!" A broad hand reached and received. The full fed recipient leaned back and puffed in vast content. Then his face sharpened.

"Say, you ain't ate much," he accused. "Did you go shy to fill me up?"

"Oh, no. I didn't happen to be hungry. Even if I did, what of it?"

Flanagan regarded him for a long minute. The nonchalant, half mocking blue gaze met his as steadily. At length he looked aside, scanning the restaurant. Hardly any other eaters were there, and none within earshot; the regular meal time was more than an hour in the future. Deliberately he laid his thick forearms on the littered table, leaned forward, and said:

"Listen, *hombre*. You've sure used me

white. Maybe I might square it by lettin' you in on somethin' good."

"Yes?" Thorne's laugh was tolerant but skeptical. "All right. Shoot."

"I'm shootin'. All I'm shootin' is a story, because that's all I've got. But I believe the story's true. I believe it so strong that I've come more than a thousand miles, mostly on foot, to find out if it's so. And I ain't got to where I'm goin' yet. But it won't be long now. And if the thing is there that ought to be there it's worth goin' after. I'd just as soon have a pardner, too, if he's built right. Above the eyes, I mean. And I've got a hunch that you'd do. From what you've let slip, you've been playin' the market back home and the lottery here, both to the limit. And judgin' from that and what else I've seen, you'll take a chance and see it through, and if the luck runs bad it's all O. K. with you just the same. And a guy like that—But wait a minute. I don't even know your name yet."

"Thorne. From New York. What's yours?"

"Flanagan. From—uh—points West."

"So? Somehow you don't talk just like some Westerners I've known."

"Maybe not. Maybe I ain't always lived West. Maybe I could tell you some things you don't know about New York. *And* Chicago. And some other places. Includin' this burg right here. I blew in here only three days ago, but I bet I know things you don't. And I ain't stayin'. It ain't healthy. I'd have got out sooner, but I was so tired I had to stop and rest. *And* eat."

His monolog came in low rumble, punctuated by glances aside and puffs at the cigaret. Now he killed the butt and leaned farther forward, intent, aggressive.

"What you doin' down here?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Took a trip for my health. Went to Havana, got fed up on it in a week, and took the next steamer to Vera Cruz. One day there was enough. I've been up here three weeks."

"Uh-huh. Toured around, spent free, plunged on the lottery, got cleaned. Practically broke and no place to go. That right?"

"Just about."

"Uh-huh. Can you keep your mouth shut, and shoot straight if you have to?"

"I've done both."

"All right. Now you listen here . . ."

FOR FIFTEEN minutes he talked in the same low rumble, face emotionless. Thorne said no word, but changing expressions spoke for him. Skeptical amusement gave way to closer attention and deepening interest. The quizzical eyes lost their smile, became intent, then increasingly sharp. Presently a growing glow crept into them, and his lips curved in a reckless smile. When his protégé ceased speaking he lifted his gaze to stare at nothing. The little lines at the corners of his eyes alternately deepened and faded. Then his whole face became defensively expressionless.

"That's a devil of a good yarn," he commented. "I'll think about it tonight. Meet me here tomorrow noon, will you?"

"No, I won't," came the terse refusal.

"Why?"

"I don't belong up here in these clothes, that's why. Cops get too curious. Curiosity's liable to be damn' fatal when it goes too far. If you want to see me tomorrow come down to the Thieves' Market. I ain't a thief, but I can get by down there. Know where it is?"

"Oh yes. Next to the presidential palace."

"Right. Good place for it, too." Flanagan grinned cynically. "All right, then. Now I'll vamoos. There's just one thing I'm askin' you. If you don't want in on this, keep it behind your teeth."

"I'll do that. And you might see me tomorrow."

"It's up to you. So long."

Flanagan pulled on his hat and arose. Thorne beckoned to the waitress for the bill.

"Oh, and say, how much'll you need to

square your hotel bill this week?" added the departing guest.

"About fifty or sixty pesos. Why?"

"I was just wonderin'. *Adios.*"

Without further word or look he walked away, watchful of the door and whatever might wait beyond. He went through the portal and was gone. From outside came no sudden sounds. A police whistle blew, but its message was only the usual traffic signal. The customary late afternoon stream of life on Avenida Juarez flowed on its way, carrying the stranger with it.

When Thorne emerged he saw only Mexicans, a couple of tourists, a mestizo woman selling drawnwork, a pair of gaudily dressed and over-painted girls of the streets—nothing out of the ordinary run. He sauntered away toward the Paseo and his armadillo.

For a block he walked with a joyous light in his face. Then it faded out, and his lips began to droop. And as he passed the lottery building he laughed mirthlessly at himself.

"Always chasing rainbows, you fool!" he scoffed. "And the rainbow always moves just before you find the pot of gold at its foot. And this rainbow over the Enchanted Hill is the most visionary one yet. It was a good yarn, but the spinner is gone, and so it ends. Yes, Flanagan, *adios!*"

CHAPTER III

A LITTLE BOX

MORNING, with bright sun.

In pajamas and bathrobe, Thorne leaned on the sill of his wide window, looking out across the hazy high valley of Mexico at the majestic volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl—Smoke Mountain and White Woman. His gaze was absent, dreamy.

A knock at the door across the room recalled him from fantasies. He turned.

"Come!" he bade.

The door swung, admitting a waitress carrying a breakfast tray. With soft toned greeting, she set it on the writing desk.

"A little box for you, señor." She nodded toward a small square package at one edge of the tray. "It was left with the clerk late last night."

"*Gracias,*" he acknowledged.

As she went he examined the unusual addition to his meal. Flat, neatly wrapped, tightly tied with strong twine, it seemed a box of tablets from some drug store. But he had ordered no medicine. And the box was a trifle heavy for its size.

With the butter knife he sawed the cord apart. The paper stuck, and he found its edges pasted down. Whoever had left the package had allowed no chance for prying by the night clerk. The knife served again, and the lid became accessible. Inside, the box was crudely cushioned with a crumpled fragment of newspaper, forming a nest for a small wad of red rag.

He dumped it on the table. The rag fell with a solid thud and a clink, spreading on impact. From it magically appeared edges of gold coins.

Dumfounded, he stared; then snatched up the cloth. On the wood lay five gold discs: one twenty-peso piece, four tens; sixty pesos in all. He peered at the rag. It was part of a faded bandanna handkerchief. He looked at the box. In the cavity where the gold had snuggled lay a folded bit of brown paper. He opened it. Scrawled on it was the hasty message:

> Thorn, I found this on street and thouht it be good for what ales you.

Thorne abruptly sat down, to stare anew at gold, box and note. Flanagan! Sixty pesos from Flanagan, who yesterday had lacked the price of a meal! Flanagan had found this . . .

"Huh!" he grunted, his voice almost an echo of Flanagan's.

His dilated pupils contracted, and in them grew comprehension. He saw again the hard eyes, the hard mouth and jaw, and the hard bulge of a gun butt inside the coat. He heard again the casual question: "How much'll you need to

square your hotel bill?" and his own reply. And he visioned some swarthy libertine or crook standing against some dark wall, down in the tough part of the city, with a cold revolver muzzle against his stomach and colder eyes boring into his brain.

"Found it on the street, did you?" he mumbled, rereading the scrawl. "Man, you're certainly good!"

For a minute he sat chuckling. Then he sobered. His left hand reached out and covered the gold from sight. His gaze centered on the blank wall, seeing it not at all. Through many ticks of his wrist watch he remained immobile. At length he glanced at the timepiece and seized upon his breakfast, now nearly cold.

"All right, Flanagan, you hard old egg," he muttered, between bites. "You've bought something. Hope you'll find it worth having."

Rapidly he finished the meal; lighted a cigaret and, with the same match, burned Flanagan's note in his ash tray; tossed box and rag into the waste basket, and moved to his bathroom to shave.

Half an hour later he emerged from the hotel with a sack, in which he bore a well fed and cheerful armadillo. He hailed a roving taxi without a meter, bargained with its driver, and thereafter rode eight miles out of the city to the Pedregal, an ancient lava stream, irregular, contorted, thinly grassed and bushed, wherein were many holes and caverns. There he loosed his reinvigorated captive.

"Goodby, little chap," he said. "If you can't hide and be happy here you can't anywhere. You're on your own again. And, as Flanagan says, it's up to you."

The armadillo moved off, taking his time, scenting the air and the ground of his new demesne. The man turned and walked briskly back to the road.

"Al Zócalo," he briefly instructed the driver.

The little car jounced slowly back over the uneven road, heading for the Zócalo, or Plaza Mayor, or Great Square, of Mexico City. At the southeastern corner of the Zócalo is the Thieves' Market.

CHAPTER IV

STRANGERS

SOUTH from metropolitan Mexico City lies another world, the world which was there before the Spaniards came; before the Mexicans came; before the Aztecs, or their predecessors, the Toltecs, came.

The hand of modern man, directed by the blundering brain of modern man, has transformed the once well watered Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City, into an arid stretch wherein grows little but the maguey plant, source of brain rotting liquor. It has drained the ancient lakes, drained also the subsoil waters, until the city which it has built on the prehistoric lake bed has begun to sink slowly but inexorably into the earth. That city has its beautiful buildings, its superb statues, its trim parks and boulevards, its fast trolleys and motors, its efficient police and smart troops. But it has not stability nor solidity. It has not a firm foundation. It is a man made thing; and whenever one of the dormant volcanic giants a few leagues off moves slightly in sleep it creaks and cracks and totters. Some day, soon or late, it will crash in ruin.

Hardly a hundred miles southward is the world that was. A world of massed mountains, vast caverns, deep gorges, turbulent streams, wild forests, wilder beasts and birds and reptiles. A world rough, rugged, untamed; inconceivably rich in minerals and woods and plants, yet untraversed by any railroad and, in many parts, as yet unknown. There the Indian lives much as his forefathers lived in times pre-Columbian; there the white or semi-white refugee from political or personal enemies may find sanctuary. Though the hand of government may be swift and strong in the high valley at the north, here in the unconquered mountains it is feeble and slow; so slow that men may, and do, sneer and spit at it while it gropes about in search for them.

Yet in the tiny town of Ixtlatixtla, accessible only by a narrow trail squirming up into the mountains from a rapid

river, Don Felipe Rodriguez had not yet become contemptuous of the reach of that merciless hand. Although months had passed since he fled Mexico City and evaded the firing squad awaiting all co-conspirators of the unlucky General Serrano, the escape had been so narrow that even now he sometimes started from siesta to look warily about him and listen for stealthy steps; and whenever strange men approached or arrived he maintained vigilance until assured that they were only prospectors, bandits, or other wanderers unsubservient to the federal powers. Even then he viewed them with lingering suspicion. He knew well that some secret service agents were clever at disguise. Moreover, he had his daughter to guard.

Mariquita, of pure Spanish blood and more than usual Spanish beauty, was a girl who needed guarding even in the metropolis. Eighteen, shapely, vivacious, fearless, keenly alive, aware of her own charm, she had wilfully aroused romantic dreams in the heart of more than one youth of her own social standing there, only to laugh them off. Here in this much rougher region she was reserved, cool, careful. But the mere sight of her was enough to bring to the eyes of any male rover an ardent gleam; and occasionally, for a fleeting instant, a mischievous spark in her own gray orbs answered. Sometimes the smallest spark may ignite fires which swiftly become destructive. Therefore Rodriguez, knowing both his girl and his environment, was doubly watchful.

With the Spaniard's eye to defense, he had chosen the strongest house in the pueblo: a stone building, low but thick walled, with a slitted tower commanding both the little plaza and the one road of ingress. And now, on a day when news spread that two white men were riding up from the river, he stopped short in a languid stroll and returned with quickened step to his fortress. There he lifted a rifle from a corner, set it beside the door, loosened the military pistol holstered beneath his light coat, and stood with apparent negligence just inside the threshold. His left hand toyed with a recently grown black beard. His right hung idle at his side. His eyes watched the road.

Soft footsteps sounded behind him. Mariquita's lilting voice spoke.

"Some one comes, *padre?*"

"Two men, *chiquita,*" he tranquilly informed her. "There they are, coming around the bend. Hmm! Strangers—and, I think, city men!"

His right hand arose to his belt, to hook the thumb over it. Although the men were yet afar, he had perceived that they rode their burros awkwardly and that they wore hats smaller than the hulking local sombreros.

"Let me see."

She nudged him a little aside and stood peering with eager interest. In this drab, dull, lost little town the approach of any stranger was an event.

He glanced down at her. She was wearing a sedate house dress, home made, long and loose, like the garments of the village women. Since the day was cloudy and cool, however, she had thrown over her shoulders a brilliant *zarape,* which now was draped about her in vivid stripes of color. In her black hair was thrust a crimson flower just picked in the patio. She brightened the darksome portal like a living flame. But at the moment he considered it advisable to have that doorway not too attractive.

"Step back," he prompted. "And take off the *zarape.*"

She laughed and held her place.

"Those men are not dangerous," she declared. "They carry no rifles. And any army men skilful enough to follow you would be better riders than they."

He made no reply. Watching the riders plod nearer, however, he stood more easily.

SLOWLY the strangers came on, studying the town. The town in turn studied them. Huge hatted mestizo men and slatternly mestiza women lounged in doorways or loitered outside, their listless attitudes cloaking keen surveillance. Every man there had reason to be on

guard against newcomers. As the travelers advanced to the plaza, however, it became apparent that they were not seeking any one. Their glances at the faces along the way were impersonal and indifferent.

Before the stone house they stopped, still looking ahead, toward the farther end of the short hamlet. The first pushed back his light gray hat, ran a finger along his damp forehead, then dropped a hand to the pocket of his khaki shirt and drew out a cigaret.

"Well, Buck," he drawled, "this seems to be it. Now where do we go from here?"

"I dunno, Thorne," came uncertain response, in a harder voice. "Got to find some hangout for the night."

"*Americanos!*" softly announced Mariquita.

"*Sí*," assented her father. For an instant longer he studied the brown clothed forms, the cartridge belts and holstered side arms and, more shrewdly, the faces; one hard, set, ungracious, bronzed by many suns, the other lighter of shade and more mobile of expression. Then he stepped out toward them.

"Might as well crawl along a bit farther—" began the first, only to break off and shoot a look at the approaching Rodriguez.

"Can I be of assistance to you, sir?" offered the Spaniard, in English.

For a few seconds both the outlanders stared. Rodriguez, though bearded and clothed in baggy whites and coarse palm hat, had the dignified bearing and the courteous air of a born *hidalgo*. To find in this uncouth town a Spanish gentleman, to hear him speak cultured English, and then to spy beyond him the striking figure and vivid face of Mariquita—all this was enough to hold the Northerners speechless and motionless for an appreciable time. The rougher one was still gaping at the girl when the other recovered himself.

"Thank you," he responded, raising hand to hat. "We're strangers, and we'd like to find a place where we can eat and sleep."

"Ah, yes."

The right hand of Rodriguez had instinctively lifted toward his own sombrero, but halted. Now it moved and pointed a little beyond. "There is a house which will serve your needs for the night. It is unoccupied and unfurnished, but hammocks and food can be obtained. And it is quite clean."

"We have hammocks." The American moved his head, indicating a small pack on his donkey's hindquarters. "But we'll gladly buy some food as soon as possible."

"Any of these people can supply it."

Thorne looked around at "these people", finding a thick arc of natives curved close at his right. They had approached soundlessly, and now they stood silent. Their faces still showed no curiosity. But every pair of dark eyes held a pointed question.

"Watch yourself," quietly warned Flanagan, who had probed many a Mexican gaze in his long pilgrimage. "We ain't popular."

He sat loosely, giving no apparent attention to any of the mestizos, yet seeing all. His companion, after a casual survey, turned again to the eagle faced white man.

"Thank you," he repeated. "We shall try to make ourselves comfortable. I am an amateur archæologist, and have come down from Mexico City to look around for possible prehistoric remains. My name is Thorne. My partner is Mr. Flanagan."

"Ah. You are sent by the Museo Nacional?"

"Oh, no. I am operating independently. Any discoveries I make will not be reported—at least, not to Mexico City officials."

The blue eyes, looking steadily into the intent gray ones of the refugee, held the ghost of a smile. Far down in the Spanish pupils something glimmered in response.

"You will find the people here willing to help you keep secrets, sir. Like you, this place operates independently."

"That suits me." Thorne's smile broadened. "Well, we'll move over to our quarters. And I'd like to talk further with you later on, Mr.—"

"Rodriguez." The fugitive announced his name calmly. The newcomer showed no recognition of it. "I shall be honored if you will call on me at your earliest convenience."

"With pleasure. This evening, perhaps?"

"If you are not too tired from your journey."

"Righto. Then *adios* for a little while."

The gray hat rose. The blue eyes lifted to dwell for a second on the piquant face of Mariquita, who instantly dropped her own gaze, but smiled a wee smile. The dusty donkeys plodded forward again. The Spaniard who, this time, had responded to the salute, let his sombrero drop to the back of his head, leaving his high forehead unmasked. The natives, still motionless, looked after the aliens, then at the man who had talked to them.

"A gentleman," explained the latter, "from the North who comes to hunt for old relics, buried towns, and such things. A scientist, if you know what that means. He will need a good guide, of course. And at the moment he wants food."

A quick change of attitude swept the group. Into all faces came a gleam of self-interest. Men, calculating their chances of securing the job of guide, slid jealous looks at one another. Women loitering behind them started homeward to collect food for sale. Only one man, a wifeless cripple with no chance of gain, expressed doubt. He sourly commented:

"To me they look more like sly hunters of gold. That second one is no gentleman or man of learning. He is a hard *hombre*, and fast with his gun, or I am an imbecile."

"It is well known that you are an imbecile," countered Rodriguez, with tranquil contempt. "Yet you have it partly right. The second one, who is the assistant of the señor, would be dangerous to cross. And the señor himself, if you children ask me, would not be incapable with his own weapon."

With that he turned toward his doorway. He found it empty and dark save for a fleeting flash of a vanishing *zarape*. Mariquita, who had steadfastly watched the *Americanos* and heard all the conversation, now was hastening to doff her country dress and don her most stylish Mexico City gown. The styles of Mexico City are those of New York.

CHAPTER V

BLUFF

AT A SMALL, battered table in a little adobe house, Thorne and Flanagan leaned back, full fed, lighted smokes, and regarded each other with lazy contentment.

The table, the rickety chairs, the plentiful food which now had vanished from the board, and even the candles ready in bottle candlesticks—but as yet unlighted—were the property of the fast working native woman who, aided by a brawny male, had reached the spot first and held it against all comers. While the señores ate, she and her capable assistant had hung hammocks, fetched large jars of water, and otherwise made the place thoroughly habitable. Now they lounged on the door sill, blocking ingress of their neighbors and—until they saw the color of the foreigners' money—egress of their patrons. For the time, however, they remained forgotten.

"Pardner, you're sure lookin' better than you did a few days back," volunteered Flanagan.

His partner blew a long ribbon of smoke through half smiling lips.

"Think so?"

"I know so!" came positive assertion. "And what's more, you *are* better! That funny little jerk you had around your eyes and mouth every few minutes is all gone. And you pick up your feet quicker when you walk, and you act more alive all over."

"I feel that way," admitted the other. "I'm sleeping better by night, and feel steadier by day, than I have for a long time. This sort of thing agrees with me better than the city life. It always did."

"You ain't always been a New Yorker?"

"I grew up in Maine."

"Oh. That's different. Yeah, that explains a lot. I've been noticin' that it seemed to come easy to you to make camp, and so on, and I wondered where you got your trainin'. Maybe you went overseas awhile, too, hey? Uh-huh. Well, anyway, since you shucked off your New York clothes and got into a regular outfit you've come alive *pronto.* That first day I saw you in the Alameda you looked sick of livin'."

"As bad as that?"

"Uh-huh. Not desperate, I don't mean, but clean fed up on the whole cock eyed world. You set there on one of those tall tile benches, lookin' at nothin' and seein' nobody. And thinks I, 'There's a guy that's so rotten with money he's got nothin' left to live for. He's been every place and done everything, and there he just sets, all dressed up, with no place to go. I'm better off than he is, at that. I've got somethin' ahead of me.' And then you got up and begun to drag your dogs towards the corner, and I dragged along behind to see what you'd do, if anything. And— Well, it's sure funny how things work out sometimes, ain't it?"

They smoked in reminiscent silence for a minute or two.

"I'm sure glad I played my hunch that afternoon and let you in on this," continued the speaker. "You was worth the whole price of admission today, the way you eased us out of what looked like a jam. I thought we were in for somethin' there when the gang snaked up on us. But just what kind of a steer was it you slipped to our spinach friend out yonder? I heard it plain, but it stuck in my ear."

"We're archæologists," chuckled Thorne. "Which means that we're hunting for some prehistoric Indian town or other. They're all over Mexico, so there ought to be one or more around here. And that lets us go snooping around and asking questions until we find—"

He broke off, glancing doorward. The pair there knew no English, he had already ascertained. But he withheld the rest.

"Uh-huh." Flanagan nodded. "It's a good blind. Arky—what?"

"Ologists."

"Arky-ologists." He rolled the syllables around his tongue. "All right, I got it. Is it real, or did you make it up?"

"It's real. Didn't you notice how it got over with Rodriguez?"

"Uh-huh, that's right. Say, that old bird don't belong here. He's on the dodge."

Thorne nodded and pushed the ash off his cigaret.

"From Mexico City, unless I'm a rotten guesser," he opined. "His manner and education are too good to belong to any place nearer than that. He's traveled, too. Otherwise his English wouldn't be so good. Chances are that he's been playing politics and bet on the wrong horse. At any rate he's in retirement for his health."

"That's my guess, too. And he's been around here long enough to know the lay of the land. His clothes show that. So he maybe could give us a straight tip if he's handled right. And you're the lad to handle him. So go on and do your stuff. I'll stick here."

"Oh, come on over."

"Nope. I wouldn't do you any good, or me either. And this door only locks on the inside. I'll hang around and keep greasy fingers out of the packs."

He looked suspiciously at the squatters, out at the darkening village, back again.

"And you'd better work a little more magic and show these here greasers some money," he added. "But don't let 'em look too close, or they might not feed us long."

They grinned slyly at each other.

"All big business is done on credit," jested Thorne. With which he drew from a pocket a handkerchief and, apparently by accident, a small handful of coins which fell to the hard earth floor.

At the ringing impact both the Mexican heads turned as if jerked by a string. Thorne stooped and gathered up the money, which he slid back into the

pocket. Then he glanced carelessly at the brown faces.

"The food was very good," he remarked. "Bring more in the morning."

"*Sí, señor!*" readily assented the woman. "And, señor, please let none but us serve you. We shall give you always the very best."

"*Bien.*"

Thorne yawned. The woman nudged her companion. Both rose and went, well content. In their momentary gaze at the fallen coins they had seen, among the ordinary silver pesos, at least a dozen gleams of bright yellow.

When they had gone, Thorne chuckled:

"It was a good idea of yours, Buck, to scour up all these coppers. They certainly look like gold."

"Yeah. It takes some work to turn two cents into ten dollars, but it sure pays," grinned Flanagan. "And it's nothin' to what we're goin' to do if luck holds good. Well, go ahead now, Arky Ologist, and start your diggin'."

CHAPTER VI

TREASURE

CANDLE flames, gently wavering in tiny night breezes, cast variant lights and shadows about the wide living room of the stone house. They revealed, yet softened, the grim walls, undecked by any ornament. They gave transitory life to the empty shades lurking beyond heavy, service worn table and chairs and couch. And they reflected, in evanescent glints, from two pairs of Spanish gray eyes and from one of American blue.

The three who sat in congenial converse were the same who had met that afternoon, yet not the same. The khaki shirted, dusty putteed alien on a donkey, the baggy clothed interrogator with hat pulled low, the long skirted damsel in gaudy shawl, all were metamorphosed. Now the first lounged in white linen and dark suit; the second, with hair and beard smoothly trimmed and combed, sat erect in perfectly fitting black. And the girl of the doorway had become a señorita of society, in black chiffon, short, sleeveless, stylish, with an exotic red flower at the shoulder. Unlike many society girls, however, she wore no rouge. Lips vivid with health, cheeks kissed by the highland sun needed no artifice.

Cigar smoke floated thin in the softly moving air. On the table, which bore a huge bouquet of fragrant flowers and several Spanish novels, rested also two red cups of thin local pottery and a squat bottle of the same ware. From that bottle a mestiza serving woman had poured a drink or two of some deceptively mellow liquor for the señores; but she did so no more. After feeling the warmth of that potent liquid steal along his veins, the visitor, aware that further indulgence might unduly loosen his tongue, had refrained. His host, apparently more confident of his capacity, still sipped at intervals. But he was quite able and willing to help himself, as the servant well knew. So she had silently faded into the gloom beyond a convenient door.

For an hour or two talk had flowed and ebbed, with the guest bearing the main burden. Although his stay in Mexico City had been comparatively brief and his interest in it casual, he had accumulated an interesting fund of recent events and rumors, of which he now made use. And although neither his host nor his hostess betrayed by any word the fact that they were of the capital, their close attention proved their interest in its affairs. More than once, too, the expression of the girl grew pensive, almost wistful, and the observant caller felt that she longed for vanished friends and festivities. Her father, however, kept his thoughts from his face.

"Most interesting," he commented, at length. "We country folk seldom hear the news of the City." A faint smile accompanied his inference that he was a native of Ixtlatixtla. "But you say little of yourself, Mr. Thorne. If I may ask, what ruins do you plan to excavate here? I have not heard of any nearby."

"I hardly expect to do any excavating," evaded the pseudo-archæologist. "That is long and tedious work. At present I'm just scouting, to learn what may be here. The excavation would have to come later—perhaps a long time later."

"Naturally." Rodriguez idly watched his latest smoke puff drift away. "So you have no definite objective in mind?"

"Nothing very definite, no. I've heard rumors of prehistoric remains hereabouts, and just came down to poke around. Of course the reports may be purely visionary; as empty as some of the tales one hears about hidden treasures."

The Spaniard regarded him enigmatically.

"Not all the tales of hidden treasure are false," he asserted.

"No? Well, not all, perhaps. But I must admit that I'm very skeptical toward such stories."

"That is the scientific attitude, yes?" smiled Rodriguez. "To believe nothing until it is proved. Yet sometimes it is well to be credulous enough to investigate. More than one princely treasure has been unearthed in this country. And there are others, not yet found. Yes, and there are some which have been found but which still remain where they were discovered."

The visitor looked perplexed.

"Found, but not taken by the finder?" he queried. "Why not?"

"Because they are too dangerous."

HE SIPPED again at his liquor, eyeing the scientist sidewise. The latter glanced at Mariquita, who had listened much but spoke little. Heretofore she had met his regard for only an instant, then looked away with elusive coquetry. Now he found her watching him gravely; and her deep eyes did not swerve. It was his own gaze that dropped from the combined inspection of father and daughter. Then he laughed lightly.

"What are the dangers, for instance?" he prompted.

The Spaniard looked again at his cigar smoke. A long minute passed before he replied:

"Our Mexico is a land of mystery. Unknown races have lived for unknown periods of time in this country, then disappeared, leaving only pyramids, strange carvings on stone, cities which have become overgrown and forgotten. More recently, unknown men of the white race have gathered fortunes, and, for unknown reasons, have hidden them and met unknown fates. But they still guard those treasures. And, by some unknown weapon, they kill every man who would carry off the gold they concealed. So the gold remains where they placed it."

Again came the sidewise glance, apparently casual, yet piercing. For a second the Northerner narrowed his lids defensively. Then he smiled again: his gaze became steady.

"That reminds me," he said, "of a story I heard awhile ago."

"Yes?" The bearded lips curved. "I should like to hear it."

"All right. It was something like this:

"Somewhere down here, some years ago, a native wandering around happened to find the mouth of a little cave. And he went in to see what he might see. And after groping along a natural tunnel for awhile and lighting a match now and then, he found the passage blocked by a heavy door. He opened it, and on the other side he found a large cavern. And inside that cavern were chests of gold.

"Well, he filled his clothes with treasure and started out. And then from somewhere came a voice, saying:

" 'All or none! Take all or none!' "

He paused, looking absently at the farther wall, but feeling the concentrated watch of father and daughter. In the silence sounded three quick puffs from the cigar of Rodriguez.

"*Toda ó nada*—everything or nothing!" echoed Mariquita, as if familiar with the story. "And then, señor?"

"Well, then the fellow lost his nerve. He knew he couldn't carry off all the gold—he had hardly skimmed the top of one chest—so he went back and emptied his

pockets, or thought he did. Then he went away as fast as he could. By the time he reached home, though, he had recovered some courage and determined to go back. So he told a chum of his about it. And while he was telling the story he shoved his hands into his pockets, and in one of them he found one gold piece. It was very old. And his friend knew that when he had left home he had had no money at all, not even a copper. So he believed the story, and the two of them made plans to go to the cave the next day. But that night the man who had found it grew ill, and at daybreak he died."

"Yes?" queried Rodriguez, as the Northerner stopped.

"Yes, according to the story." Thorne smiled once more. "And after that his partner didn't dare go to the place. But he told others. And since that time a number of chaps have tried to find the cave. And a few have found it. But those who found it have died. So nobody goes there now. Quite a romantic yarn, isn't it?"

"Quite," agreed the Spaniard. "And absolutely true."

"No! Really?"

"Really. The cave is in the side of a small mountain, which now is known as *El Cerro Encantado*—The Enchanted Hill. And this is the town from which the first discoverer went. He came back here and died. So the story is well known here. But where, if I may ask, did you hear it? Not in your New York."

"No. Nearer than that."

Thorne sought now to avoid the older man's eyes. But they stabbed like rapiers. And the next swift question pierced his wavering pretence as a sword would penetrate a shield of paper.

"And how, sir, do you plan to get that gold which has killed all other finders?"

THE AMERICAN flushed, knowing himself cornered, but a trifle nettled by the sudden abandonment of fencing for a direct thrust. Then he shrugged and parried—

"How would you get it?"

"That is what I have often wondered," candidly admitted the refugee.

With that he chuckled and sipped again at his cup. Thorne threw back his head and laughed. Mariquita regarded both men soberly, opened her lips to voice some quick thought, then withheld it.

"In that case, perhaps we might get together on the problem," suggested Thorne. "Even an archæologist can sometimes make use of gold."

"All men can find use for it."

"True enough. But now, if I may ask some personal questions in my turn, why is it that a man of your mentality, who can use that treasure, has not gone after it? You're no superstitious mestizo, like the rest of these people around here. And what's more, you don't belong in such a place as this, and I doubt that you intend to spend the rest of your life here. And even if you do—"

He left the sentence unfinished, but his glance flitted to Mariquita, white, high born, high bred, marooned amid illiterate, mud faced natives of lawless mountains. Her father's mouth tightened.

"Quite right," he acknowledged. "There are better things to do with life than to waste it here. Yet, even here, life is far better than useless death. And the same reason which might make me wish for that deadly treasure of the Enchanted Hill has restrained me from trying to take it."

"I understand," nodded the other.

"And there is no room for doubt that men who touch that treasure perish."

"Ah. And just what kills them?"

"That is what nobody knows. Men of Ixtlatixtla have taken some of the gold, and heard the voice, and fled; and soon afterward their strength left them, and they lay down and died. It was not their own fears that killed them, either; for since the death of the first finder only men who were bold and desperate have tried to loot that cave. But all are dead—all killed by the hand of the unseen, unfelt devil who guards the place!"

Thorne sat silent, impressed despite

himself. Had he heard that last assertion from any untutored Ixtlatixtlan he would have scoffed. But from a man of Rodriguez's evident culture and ancestry, a descendant of fearless *conquistadores* who had dared earth, heaven, and hell for gold . . .

"*Oh padre mío!*" exclaimed Mariquita, leaning tensely forward. "You will not try to take that infernal treasure! You must not! Some other way will open—And you, señor, you must not dare that horrible—"

She stopped short, a blush crimsoning her skin as she realized that she was betraying deep personal interest in the newcomer. Although she had just amused herself by evasive flirtation with him, this open manifestation of concern was unpremeditated. She bit her lip and looked quickly away.

Her father eyed her with a touch of sternness, then toyed with his cup. Thorne watched her appreciatively a moment. She refused to meet his gaze.

"No doubt Miss Rodriguez is quite right, sir," he addressed the annoyed parent. "We should be foolish to attempt anything so perilous. But before we abandon the subject, tell me this: Could you find the cave if you wished?"

"I know of a man who can."

"Good. I'd rather like to take a look at the outside of that hill while I'm scouting around. There would be no danger in that, I suppose."

"No, I believe not." The gray eyes twinkled. "And the man is a good guide; an Indian who knows all the country for many miles. He would be helpful to you in hunting for your buried city. Perhaps I can arrange it for you."

"I'll appreciate it. And, if you have nothing better to do, I hope you will come along with us on some of our exploring trips."

"With much pleasure. I should like to learn something about archæology."

The two grinned. Thorne arose.

"I'll see you in the morning, then, perhaps? And now I'll be toddling toward my hammock. I'm a trifle weary after a long day of travel."

"Naturally. A good rest to you, and pleasant dreams."

"I'm sure they will be pleasant."

The smiling Northern eyes moved to meet those of the Southern girl, which once more returned his gaze steadily. In the gray depths were displeasure, disapproval of the transparent agreement between the men, yet, in an instant, a flash of reckless daring.

At the door the visitor shook hands with his host in formal leavetaking. The two masculine palms gripped strongly in mutual understanding. Then, laughingly, he extended his hand for a brief grasp of more delicate fingers. The touch was momentary, careless, outwardly meaningless. Yet, as he walked away through thin moonlight, he hummed a lilting Spanish air. And Mariquita stood watching him with nerves a-thrill. Both still felt a quick, firm pressure which had come and gone in a breath, yet was to remain with them throughout the night.

CHAPTER VII

SUSPICION

"WHAT luck, pardner?"

Flanagan, a dark bulk in a shadowed doorway, spoke quietly as his comrade drew near. With a start Thorne recalled himself *from* aureate visions.

"Thought you were going to bed," he challenged.

"I am." Teeth glimmered white. "But meanwhiles I've been takin' the cool and makin' up poetry."

"Poetry? You?" Thorne snickered. "Tell me another."

A low chuckle answered.

"Don't believe me, huh? All right, listen close:

"I set on my steps in the moonshine,
A-wishin' that I was a hummin' *bird*,
And along comes a little brown parrot
And tells me some things that I'm glad I *heard*.

"Now how's that?"

"Pretty rotten, but lots better than I expected." The Easterner peered sharply at the grinning face now close to his own. "And, maybe, more truth than poetry."

"You guessed right, Arky Ologist. It's plumb true."

"And who was the parrot?"

"That'd be tellin'. But I don't mind sayin' that you ain't the only one that can have a little sociable affair. I don't even have to go lookin' for mine. They come to me."

"Well, you old he-vamp, you! I never thought it of you."

"There's lots you don't know about me. But come on in and shut the door, and we'll swap antidotes."

"You mean anecdotes. All right. Get out from under foot."

Flanagan gave way, walked in, lighted a candle. Thorne barred the plank door, threw coat and hat into his hammock, and eyed the two windows of the place. They were long but narrow apertures, through which could pass air, light, sound, but little else. Now they were blank.

"There's nobody around," declared Flanagan. "Speak your piece."

He sat in one of the creaky chairs, facing a window. Thorne sank into the other.

"Well, we're on a hot trail," he announced. "The yarn that fellow gave you up in Texas—Ortiz, did you call him?—seems to be true. Rodriguez knows it and believes it. And, just as you guessed, he can steer us to the Hill, or get a man who can. Our talk went about like this . . ."

In a few minutes he summarized the information he had gleamed. The listener's face grew morose.

"Uh-huh. That's about what you could expect," he grumbled. "This greaser—"

"I wouldn't call him that," objected Thorne.

"Well, I would!" growled the other. "They're all alike, white or yeller or brown. They've got a country rotten with gold, but they wait for somebody else to come and find it for 'em, and then they hi-jack him. They're too damn' lazy to work for it, but when it's dug out they're right there with a knife or a bullet, and the guy that done the work is meat for the buzzards. Now take this Rodriguez; he's been here some while, and he knows the story, but does he go get the gold? Not much. But here comes you and me, and right away he wants in on our game. And we let him in, maybe, and pull that stuff out of the cave, maybe, and then what happens? A tree or a rock spits a couple of bullets and we're through. That ain't what I come down here for!"

"Nor I, either. But you're wrong, old chap. I've been sizing him up all the evening, and if he isn't square I'll eat a whole bushel of bullets, red hot. And, speaking of Mexicans, wasn't it a Mexican who first told you about the Hill?"

"Well, yeah. But he was a Texas Mexican, and—"

"For how long? You told me he hadn't been across the Border six months when you met him, and he gave you the story because you'd protected him from some tough Texans when he was down and out. If that's not playing square, what is?"

"Well, that's right too. But he was different from the rest of these spigs."

"How do you know? There are fourteen million people in this country. Have you met every one of them and proved every one crooked? Snap out of it, Buck! You've soaked up a lot of Border prejudice, that's all. And even if Rodriguez should turn crooked, we both have eyes and ears and brains, haven't we? And we both carry guns and know what they're made for, don't we? Well, then."

He paused. Flanagan's hard mouth curved.

"There's somethin' in that, pardner."

"All right. But we won't need them against Rodriguez. Take my word for that. And if he takes us to the cave and does his share, he's entitled to a fair share of the gold. And if he doesn't take us there, who else will? Did your brown parrot tell you anything about that? And now let's hear about that parrot. I've spun my yarn. You spin yours."

He sat back, folded his hands behind his head, and waited. The cold light

went out of Flanagan's eyes, and his crooked grin became more mirthful.

"FAIR enough," Flanagan said. "This woman, she comes around to take a look at me, and she ain't so hard to look at, herself, so I let her hang around. And, bein' an arky-ologist, I'm willin' to learn the lay of the land around here. So she tells me her man is away, and she's lonesome, and also broke, and so on. You know that line. So I give her a cigaret and we talk awhile. She tries to find out all about you and me, of course, but she don't get far. Meanwhiles I'm askin' some questions myself."

"About the Hill?" Thorne cut in.

"Oh, no." Flanagan looked pained. "I ain't cuttin' across your trail, pardner. You're runnin' that down yourself, so I lay off it. I just ask about things around this here town. And it's medium hard boiled."

"That's easily believed. Most of the men look as if they might be wanted somewhere."

"They all are. Ever hear of the Zapata brothers?"

"Zapata? You mean the rebels who fought the government for years and massacred all the federals they could capture?"

"That's right. Tough eggs, they were, with a big gang of Indians and breeds behind 'em. Finally the Carranza government killed 'em, and the gang went to pieces and hunted their holes. Well, these birds here are old Zapatistas. There ain't hardly one of 'em that ain't cut some poor devil of a soldier to pieces and made him like it. So they're still layin' low, and they've got no use for outsiders, exceptin' your smooth old pal Rodriguez. He stands ace high with 'em. And he never told you a word about this, did he?"

"No-o-o, he didn't," admitted Thorne, thoughtfully. "But I didn't ask him any questions about the town, so there was no reason why he should give me the local history. And what of it? These people have nothing against us."

"Not yet. But they're all broke. And when you and me pull the gold out of our Enchanted Hill—"

"Wait until we pull it out, Buck. One thing at a time. We haven't even found it yet. What other news did you get?"

"Nothin' much. I got the names of the worst rattlers in the nest. And my memory's good. Now we'll see if Rodriguez picks one of 'em to guide us."

"I'm betting he won't."

"He'd better not. If he does there's goin' to be somethin' dead around here."

The grim growl brought a frown to the other's brow. But it quickly vanished in a bantering laugh.

"Feeling tough again?" he plagued. "Go on to bed and dream about your little brown parrot, old humming bird. Or have you made a date outside?"

"Nope. Not tonight." Flanagan's bleakness thawed again. "I'm tired."

"Not tonight, eh? How about tomorrow night?"

"That'd be tellin'. What do *you* figure on doin' tomorrow night?"

Thorne, unanswering, blew out the candle.

CHAPTER VIII

DISAPPEARANCE

SUNLIGHT shot across tumbled, jungled mountains. Swiftly it crept from barren summits down eastern sides, seeking far bottoms of ravines and gorges, but not yet finding them. The depths were sunk too low, guarded by cliffs too steep, to yield the secrets of the bygone night to the first inspection of the new born day. But on the higher slopes tiny pueblos and isolated, secret houses emerged from recent gloom to face the sky god as on yesterday, then to blend again into the shifting shadows of the limitless forests which screened them from the search of prying men.

In Ixtlatixtla, doors opened one by one to emit lethargic men, frowzy women, squealing children, gamboling curs. Noise spread—brays of burros, cackles and

crows of fowls, barks of dogs, yells of boys, calls and answers of adults. Then the discordant medley subsided into virtual silence, as minds and motions turned toward the business of breakfast.

Two front doors remained shut—that of the stone house of Rodriguez and that of the clay walled abode of the *Americanos*. After awhile the first swung slowly, and the brown housekeeper looked out languidly. She sent a careless survey along the single street, then leaned against the casing and watched another brown woman, balancing a wooden tray on her head, plod to the house of the outlanders. She saw the breakfast bearer set down her burden, knock on the door, wait patiently; knock again, wait again; then pass to one of the narrow windows and peer through. For several seconds the drab shape stood motionless. Then it walked rapidly back to the door, pushed, went through the portal, faded into darkness.

Presently it reappeared, lifted the tray, trudged back toward home, leaving the door open. As it drew near, the housekeeper walked forth to call:

"What news, Justa? Are the señores not there?"

"No," snapped the other. "The place is empty. They are gone, and all their belongings with them."

"*Sí?*" The inquirer laughed maliciously. "You have fed them two days, and they have slipped away from you. Ha-ha-ha-ha! And you boasted so loudly of your shrewdness in reaching them first! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"You laugh too soon, idiot," countered the other. "They paid. These were on the table."

Opening a hand not too clean, she triumphantly displayed several silver pesos.

"But," she added, falling into a whining tone, "they said nothing last night of intention to go away. When will they return? Ask the Señor Rodriguez. He must know, he is so friendly with the light foreigner."

"The señor still sleeps. Perhaps I shall ask him later, if I do not forget so small a matter," was the insolent reply. With that the housekeeper turned her back and sauntered into the house. The other woman, with a hateful look, resumed her homeward way.

Inside, the Rodriguez servant hesitated a moment, then stole to a half open door and peered within. Gray eyes, wide awake, met her gaze. Tumble haired, rosy cheeked, half clad in a diaphanous nightgown which had slipped far down one smooth shoulder, Mariquita was sitting up in bed and waiting.

"Did you hear, mistress?" ventured the mestiza.

"*Sí*, I heard. Did you say that my father still sleeps?"

"*Sí, señorita.* His door still is closed."

"Knock on it!"

The brown woman obeyed. Crossing the living room, she tapped on a thick door, at first timidly, then with more imperative force. No answer came.

Suddenly Mariquita appeared beside her, filmy garment aswirl with haste; flung the barrier open—stood motionless—darted through.

The rumpled bed within was untenanted. Beside it was a small table, on which stood an extinguished lamp, whence hung a rectangle of paper. The girl snatched the white slip, read on it bold, imperious writing:

> Remain inside this house until you receive further instructions.

Her eyes flashed rebelliously. They shot to the table top, then to the junction of headboard and wall. The pistol which had nightly lain on the stand, the rifle which should be leaning in the niche, were gone.

She whirled to the staring mestiza.

"Serve breakfast at once!" she commanded. "Then go and bring Pedro Montez— But no, Pedro will be gone. Bring his brother Tomás! Tell him to fetch two burros and his rifle. And see that you say nothing to any one else! Now move! *Vaya!*"

The woman stood a second longer, open mouthed, then vanished with sudden

celerity. The girl looked once more at the indented pillow.

"Father," she said softly, "when will you learn that I am no longer a child?"

Then she spun about and dashed back to her own room. From a cedar wardrobe she pulled a brown riding suit, which she threw on the bed. And from under her own pillow she drew a short but big bored revolver.

CHAPTER IX

THE ENCHANTED HILL

FOUR men trudged in file along an almost invisible trail.

In the lead walked a hard mouthed Indian, hatless, barefoot, but shirted and trousered in faded blue cotton, and armed with carbine and machete. Behind him came a lean Spaniard, hawk faced, black bearded, heavily belted with cartridges, carrying rifle and pistol. After him traveled a grim jawed American of sturdy build and, finally, another Northerner, more slender, less suspicious of expression, yet quick to notice every change ahead or aside. These two were unarmed save for belt guns and brass studded waist straps. But their vigilance and their self-reliant swing proved them ready for whatever obstacle might arise.

Three of the four bore packs. The exception was the Spaniard, who, true to his proud caste, had put his burden on the shoulders of the Indian, and carried only weapons. The brown man, despite the weight on his back, gave no sign of labor. He marched onward steadily, as if well used to such loads.

The Indian watched the trail. The Spaniard watched the Indian. The Western American watched the Spaniard. The Easterner gave less attention to his predecessors than to the woods on either hand and the path behind. From time to time he paused, looked back, listened for any sound of stealthy followers. Then, satisfied, he pressed on.

At length the guide turned off the vague path. Saying nothing, he picked his way through trackless woods, seemingly moving at random, yet advancing without hesitation. None of his followers questioned his new course. Each drew nearer to the one ahead and gave more attention to the rough footing.

A mile crept slowly behind. Then the close coupled column debouched from forest into open ground. Gravelly soil, thinly grassed, studded with black fragments of lava, stretched a mile or more in choppy undulations; a dreary, brown burned waste, so devoid of essential elements of plant growth that not even the mountain rains could nourish on it any heathful verdure. A few starveling trees, low, warped, stood here and there, drooping miserably. Elsewhere was nothing but meager clumps of menacing cactus.

At the end rose a hill, steep, bare sided, but topped by thick timber. In a region of lesser heights it would have been a massive thing worthy the title of *monte*. Here, by contrast with the greater mountains beyond, it was but a *cerro*. Yet its featureless dun slopes filled the vision of all the white men, obliterating all else, when the Indian spoke one word.

"*Allá*," he said. "There." His free hand lifted, pointed, sank.

They halted. Sun, three hours high, smote across the intervening space. In it nothing moved. No animal slunk away, no bird flew up, no butterfly floated on the morning breeze. Desolation ruled the barren ground.

"Yup, that's it!" blurted Flanagan, hungrily. "It looks just like Ortiz said."

"Who?" queried Rodriguez, sliding a look at him.

"Friend of mine," curtly. "Let's go!"

The Spaniard's lids narrowed, but he said nothing further. Between him and the crusty Northerner no love was lost. In the past day or two Flanagan had taken scant pains to conceal the fact that he distrusted the Mexican exile, although the name of the chosen guide—Pedro Montez—was not one of those listed in his suspicious memory. Rodriguez, believing him to be a subordinate of the Easterner, had retaliated by virtually ignoring him;

and this tacit disdain had naturally increased the rugged fellow's dislike. Now, though the Southerner perceived that the supposed assistant was the actual leader, he did not change his attitude. His only acknowledgment of the other's behest was to repeat it in Spanish to the Indian—

"*Vamonos.*"

They resumed progress. For a moment they broke formation, Flanagan and Thorne pressing eagerly forward, attention fixed on the hill. The Indian spoke again.

"*Cuidado! Hay cascabeles.*"

"Eh?" queried Thorne.

"Take care," translated Rodriguez. "There are rattlesnakes."

"Umph!" The Easterner slowed abruptly, as did Flanagan. The guide forged onward, stolid but alert. After a second of hesitation the others again took their places behind him, trusting to his quicker perception of lurking menace.

Here in the open the sun struck hard and hot, though still only halfway up the eastern sky. Gravel and lava reflected both heat and glare. Within ten rods the men were marching with eyes defensively puckered and hands mopping faces. Another ten, and the Indian grunted warningly and stepped to his right. From the left front, close at hand, sounded a dry buzz.

"Snake!" cautioned Flanagan. "Follow me, Thorne."

LIKE the two Mexicans, he detoured the spot—a small depression, bush screened—whence issued the burr. Thorne paused, hand on gun, vainly seeking sight of the reptile. His partner grinned.

"Come on," he prompted. "No use wastin' a good bullet on him. Besides, he's played square. Let's do the same by *him.*"

"You're right, at that," conceded the recent rescuer of an armadillo. And he followed on.

Halfway across the small desert, another rattle sounded. Again the Indian deflected his course, giving no other attention to the ready snake. This time all followed his example without pause or comment.

As they advanced, the hill grew steadily longer and higher, its thick head of trees more lofty. Glancing frequently at it, Thorne began to wonder how an elevation so barren of slope could grow vegetation so prolific at its top. But he could give scant consideration to a problem so unimportant. The harsh, humpy ground beneath, the breathless heat around, the weight on his unaccustomed back, the increasing fatigue resultant on a long march without breakfast, all bore more heavily on his mind than freaks of forestation.

When the four treasure hunters swung around the southern end of the hill they found themselves on greener ground. There grew lustier bushes, and not far away stood forest, curving out until it met the hill and swarmed up its side to its crest. Somewhere among those trees a bird sang with clear, metallic notes, lively though hard. From the ground ahead rose several more, to fly with leisurely wing beats into the woods. Here was life. But the memories of the men dwelt on the dead land which they had just seen, on the sinister tales which they had heard before starting; and they eyed the hill with distrust and walked with weapons ready.

"*Aquí,*" announced the pilot. "Here."

He stopped. His shining black hair tilted toward the hill. The white men, grouping beside him, stood silent. In the steep acclivity at their right was an inconspicuous opening, low, narrow, irregular, half shaded by adjacent bushes; an insignificant aperture which seemed merely a blind concavity unworthy of investigation. Yet the wary gaze of the guide, the tightened grip of his brown hand on the carbine, proved it to be more ominous than it looked.

"Huh! That?" snorted Flanagan, half angrily. After dreaming of this spot through a thousand miles of perilous, penniless plodding he felt cheated by its despicable appearance.

"That," dryly echoed Rodriguez, without looking at him.

The Spaniard's eyes remained fixed on the small entrance, and in them grew a flame of eagerness, of gold lust, of ambition for the power which the fabled hoard inside might procure; the same light which, perhaps, burned in the eyes of Cortez when he led his army up from the seacoast to conquer the Aztec empire—and, later, when he tortured Cuauhtémoc, last Indian emperor, to learn where he had concealed his gold. Flanagan, studying him sidewise, clamped his jaws grimly, holding his tongue.

Thorne, though surveying the orifice with rapt attention for a moment, seemed thereafter to lose interest. He ran his gaze along the adjacent steeps, turned his head to scan the near tree line, hitched a shoulder to ease the strain of his pack, and then felt in a damp pocket for a cigaret. Before he found it the guide spoke once more.

"Now we eat," he asserted. He turned and trudged toward the trees.

"Eat?" snapped Rodriguez. "No! This is no time to eat! Later, after we have seen—"

"Eat," calmly retorted the brown man, without pausing.

"I agree," declared Thorne. "I'm getting a headache."

"Me too," chimed Flanagan, with an antagonistic glance at Rodriguez. "My head's all right, but I'm hungry. This hill ain't goin' away. So we'll all eat, now!"

The Mexican's mouth grew thin and bloodless, and his gun hand whitened at the knuckles. But then he acquiesced.

"*Muy bien.* I had forgotten that we left before breakfast."

NONE replied. The guide led the way through the woods to water, a tiny stream which flowed quietly past the hill and parallel to its base. There he doffed his pack, dug into it, produced a capacious pot of *frijoles*, and handed out a dozen thin *tortillas*. Squatting, the four scooped beans from the common container, enwrapped them in the corn cakes, and fell to munching with more speed than delicacy.

Until appetite was satisfied and thirst quenched at the brook, none spoke. Then Thorne remarked—

"I wonder if Ixtlatixtla has missed us yet."

"It has," responded Rodriguez. "But I doubt if it has guessed where we went."

"It'll be healthier all around if they don't guess too quick," rumbled Flanagan. "Us arky-ologists are kind of temperamental, and we might act hasty if they crowded us."

Thorne, drawing at his postponed cigaret, laughed easily.

"No danger yet, Buck," he declared. "Thanks to Señor Rodriguez, we got away before daybreak and came through without witnesses. And by the time anybody suspects the truth we'll have seen the inside of our cave, and, maybe, turned it wrong side out. And," he added with sudden snap, "the sooner we get at it the better! All set?"

"You bet!"

The three whites arose swiftly. The brown man got up more deliberately, almost unwillingly; then stood, making no further move.

"Pedro, you will go in first—" began Rodriguez.

"No!" interrupted the indigene, with blunt determination. "I stay out. I watch."

The autocratic Spaniard glared.

"You dispute my order?" he rasped. "Pig! You will do what I *command!*"

"No." The brown face remained obdurate. "I will not go in."

"You're right, *hombre*," growled Flanagan. "You'll watch outside. The man that goes into that cave first is me!"

Rodriguez turned, hot eyed. The Northerner met his choleric gaze with a thin, cold smile.

"Señor, I resent your attitude!" blazed the exile. "I consider it insulting. I dislike your tone and your manner and your continual unpleasantness and—"

"That's tough, mister. I'd cry, only my handkerchief's wet already. But what I said goes. I've come a long ways to find this hole, and I'm the first man in. Anybody that don't like it can—"

"Say, say!" broke in Thorne. "What's the use of this war talk? What's it about? Nothing! You fellows both make me tired. Let Pedro stay out if he will, and you go ahead if you like, Buck. Mr. Rodriguez, be yourself! This hotheadedness is unworthy of you. Let's all have less talk and more walk. Got your light ready, Buck? Come on, then."

His incisive words ended all argument. Overruled, resentful but sensible, Rodriguez shut his mouth tightly. Flanagan swallowed something, unstrapped his pack, drew out a powerful electric torch; gave his cartridge belt a hitch, and started toward the cave. Thorne, with a similar light in hand, followed. The Spaniard glanced once at the Indian, gestured toward the packs, and strode off in his turn.

Among the trees they passed, to fade and vanish. Pedro, left alone, squatted and ate more beans; grouped the packs against a dark rock; then, silent as a shadow, moved after the white men. At the edge of the open ground he stopped, peering, listening. He heard nothing but vague rustlings among high leaves, saw nothing but the lifeless hillside and the black cave mouth. The men whom he had brought here were gone. And the bird which had poured out cheery music at their arrival sang no more.

CHAPTER X

BLACK GOLD

BLACKNESS, streaked by shifting rays of white light. Stone walls, rough, close, damp, irregular, yellow brown where the light touched them, funereal in the shadows. A low roof of the same stone, now concave, now convex, bulging here and there as if about to drop, yet never dropping. Three men advancing gradually, warily, with nerves drawn tight and eyes sweeping floor, walls, ceiling. At each twist of the winding road the leader slowed almost to a stop, shooting his light over everything ahead. But he never halted. The short file moved continuously on.

Dank air grew clammy, chilling bodies previously heated by dry sun. Unnoticed juts on the floor caught toes, causing stumbles and sudden jerks of the lights. Queer, muffled sounds impacted on strained ears, dying at once when the feet which caused them stepped more softly. But no voice spoke. Each of the three bit back exclamations, inarticulate grunts, every vocal noise. Their instinctive repression was that of primeval cave men stealing toward some sleeping monster which, if aroused, would destroy all.

Then, suddenly, the first man stopped. A hoarse note broke from his throat. Ahead, his long light centered on an unnatural obstruction—a door of hand hewn planks. There the natural tunnel ended.

"It's true!" he exulted. "There's the door, like Ortiz said! The old door that the old Spaniards put in a hundred years ago, when Spain got kicked out of Mexico! And on the other side—"

He caught his tongue. Incoherent echoes muttered along the walls. From the third man came reply, softly sibilant, yet intense:

"*Sí!* On the other side still waits gold—and a voice—and— *Vamonos, señores!*"

They moved forward. At the door the leader paused again, moving his beam of light up and down the planks and around the edges. The boards were moldy and wormeaten. The door sagged, dependent on huge but corroded hinges. On the lock side was a dull brown stain in which were several wide holes, relics of the time when some ponderous bolt had held the further cavern inviolate. Now, though the hinges still held, the ancient fastening was gone.

A sinewy hand of the leader seized the edge of the rotting barrier. Then sounded

the voice of the second man, hitherto silent.

"Wait a second, Buck. Let me look at this."

His tone, though quiet, had a penetration which caused involuntary acquiescence. All three stood still while his light moved quickly up and down, then, slowly, along the rock floor near the door.

"All right," he said. "Notice one thing—this door is shut. Who shut it? Not the men who came here before us. They left in a hurry. And notice something else: The old lock is gone. Who took it? Somebody wrenched it off, but would he carefully pocket it and carry it away? Not much. He'd leave it where it fell. So would others who came later. Well, then, who did it?"

A silence. Then came a low murmur of perception from the third man, a curt grunt from the first.

"All right," repeated the observant one. "Go ahead, Buck."

Buck tugged. The door stuck. He yanked, suddenly angry. It yielded, moved grudgingly toward him, its lower edge scraping and bumping on the stone beneath, filling the confined air with harsh noises. Aged though it was, the tough wood still retained rigidity and resistance to human force.

While Flanagan gave one last wrench at it Thorne stepped into the opening, torch spearing the blackness beyond, weapon bared and ready. No grisly shape met his eyes. No demoniac voice shouted. No infernal odor assailed his nostrils. Beyond the portal were only gloom and denser dampness and deeper chill.

A few seconds he poised there, searching the emptiness. Then Flanagan's ray stabbed under his lifted arm, and Flanagan's voice cautioned—

"Hold still till you see what you're steppin' on."

Both lights swept back and forth along the rubbly floor, hunting for any pitfall or other danger. None was there.

"O. K. Let's go."

"*Sí! Vamos!*" impatiently seconded Rodriguez.

A faint reverberation of their tones came back from the interior; a combined mutter and hiss, satirical, sinister, as if some creature mocked them under its breath. Both lights streaked the black again. Then all three men crowded through the opening in compact rush.

A few steps inward, however, they slowed again, instinctively separating to give greater freedom to their weapons; then stopped, uncertain. More deliberately than before, they moved their concentrated beams about them. Near at hand they saw only shapeless walls; farther away, dim, ghostly forms standing motionless on a corrugated floor, or pendent in high vacancy. Spectral, silent, those apparitions vanished when the revelatory rays moved aside, but stood fixed again when they swung back. At long intervals sounded slow drops of water.

"There," said Thorne, his voice involuntarily pitched low, "are some of the enchantments of this Enchanted Hill. Spooky stalactites and stalagmites."

"They're sure spooky," muttered Flanagan, his own tone unusually subdued. Then, recovering aggressiveness, he cleared his throat harshly and advanced, darting his light from side to side.

"Where's the gold?" he demanded.

DULL murmurs resounded from the unseen depths; distorted echoes of his vocal noises, senseless mumblings seeming to come from the stalactitic phantoms. Otherwise there was no answer to his truculent question. The sliding rays revealed nothing but bare rock, uneven as water roughed by wind.

Step by step the three advanced in skirmish line, eyes roving. The weird shapes of limestone grew nearer, taller, more distinct. Presently the explorers paused beside the first stalagmite, scanning it with momentary curiosity. From above fell a drop of water. At its tiny *spat* on the stone every man jumped.

"Huh!" derided Flanagan, instantly ashamed of his betrayal of nerves.

Jerking his torch away, he stepped on-

ward. Thorne's light swung also, and he turned to resume progress. Then he halted his feet and turned the lens back toward the left side of the room.

"Wait a minute," he said. "What's that?"

A low, dark, rectangular formation stood from the wave ridged floor. Blackish, semi-visible, it yet showed square lines, unnatural in this rough hewn cavern of random slants and conical drips. After a long second of keen inspection the trio walked fast toward it.

"*Santo Dios!*" cried Rodriguez. "Here it is!"

Chests, iron chests, ancient, rusted, yet still strong, stood in solid array. Half a score of them were there, snug against one another, on a flat base of rock fragments so cunningly set that they had not been displaced even by the savage earthquakes of a hundred years.

A low, inarticulate note of triumph broke from Flanagan. A hiss of indrawn breath came from Rodriguez. An exultant laugh sounded from Thorne. Fiery eyed, all contemplated the massive metal within which must be minted mineral far more precious. Then, quick and urgent, albeit quivering with restraint, the Easterner's voice warned:

"Wait a minute! They're all shut, like the door. Who shut them? Go slow."

"I don't give a damn who shut 'em!" blared Flanagan. "I know who's goin' to open 'em, and—"

Clack! Something dropped hard. It was the Spaniard's rifle, discarded to free his hands. Instantly he sprang forward and seized the lid of the nearest chest.

Cre-e-e-e-eak! The lid screamed up and over on corroded hinges. If the chest had once possessed a lock, none interfered now. The ponderous top rose, fell, banged on another treasure box behind it.

THEN Rodriguez hung poised an instant, peering down. The torches shot their brilliant beams into the chest. The men stood staring.

No yellow gleam met their eager eyes. Within lay dull disks, disordered, unattractive, looking like dirty lead.

"Sold!" groaned Flanagan, a note of heartbreak in his voice. "That ain't gold. It's—what in hell is it?"

"*Oro!*" shouted Rodriguez. "Gold! Old gold! Black with the crust of time! Gold! Gold!"

He grabbed up handfuls of the disks, shut his fists tight. Then, slowly, he opened them, letting the coins drop at random. From them sounded a brisk *chink*—the response of gold, quicker and brighter than the tardy *cling* of silver or the flat *clack* of baser minerals. Holding the last coin, he swiftly rubbed a thumb over it. Then he snatched Thorne's torch.

"*Oro!*" he repeated, gloatingly. "*Oro puro!*"

Pure gold it was, as he said. From the dingy incrustation now gleamed thin yellow lines and the edges of some image stamped by an ancient mint mold.

Flanagan moved. Starting to life after an instant of paralysis, he jabbed his pistol into its sheath and swooped both hands at the open chest. But he failed to reach it.

Thorne's right arm, outflung, smote him across the chest and halted him. Thorne's voice forbade:

"Hands off! Don't touch it!"

A fierce growl answered. Infuriated by blow and command, Flanagan struck away the restraining arm and added a body shove. Thorne staggered, then came back like a steel spring. His pistol muzzle jabbed into his partner's side. Sharp toned, he snapped—

"Back up!"

Flanagan stood petrified. He stared, hurt, amazed, accusatory. Then his eyes became agate.

"You got me," he grated. "You dirty doublecrosser! Throwin' in with the Mex, hey? Then shoot now. You'll never get another chance."

"Be yourself!" came instant retort. "We're partners. That's enough. But you keep — your — hands — off — this — stuff!"

Eye battled eye. For the first time, the blue ones were the harder.

"Use your head," continued the cold Eastern voice. "You know that men who handle that gold die!"

An instant of silence. Flanagan's face changed. The menacing expression faded. He frowned at the chests. Then he growled again, but with less force.

"Blah! D'you believe that bunk? D'you think I'd come here if I believed it? Men die, yeah. But they die because they get knifed by their pardners or bit by snakes or somethin'—or else because they're scared to death by hearin' some echoes in here."

"You're wrong. There's something else in here that killed those men. And until we find out what it is, keep off this gold!"

Impressed despite himself, Flanagan stood irresolute, scowling into the eery darkness. At once Thorne turned to the Spaniard.

"And the same to you, Mr. Rodriguez! Don't touch these coins again until we know more about this place! Drop that one in your hand back where you found it. Then we'll all— What's the matter?"

A startling change had come over the face of the exile. Color had fled, leaving his skin pallid as a fish belly. Eyes like pools of ink stared at the blackened coin in his soiled palm. Stark terror shone from them. He swallowed once, noisily. Then, with visible effort, he squared his shoulders and stood stiff, straight, high chinned, coldly self-possessed.

"Nothing," he disclaimed. "Perhaps, sir, I caught *your* fear for a moment. But that is past. And I see no reason to spend time poking about in this place, now that we have found what we came to find. We had better make preparations at once to take our gold away. And if the devil who guards it intends to stop us, let him come to us and try."

With that he seized his fallen rifle and stood haughty, defiant, inflexible, a reincarnation of his *conquistador* ancestors, one hand clutching gold and the other gripping steel, ready to fight men, beasts, or demons to hold what he had won. His momentary fright had been throttled, and he was the more dangerous for having endured it.

Into Flanagan's grim visage came a gleam of involuntary approval. His lips opened. But before they framed words the Mexican spoke again, in the same stony tone.

"You gentlemen may do as you please. I shall go out and make ready to remove my share of this treasure. And I will take some of it with me and look at it in the sunlight. Anybody or anything that wishes to stop me can strike now!"

He slipped the yellow lined coin into a trousers pocket, laid down the torch, grasped a handful of dark disks, dropped them into the same pocket. Superbly fearless, he turned his back to the Northerners and walked away into the blackness toward the invisible tunnel.

The pair behind him put their lights on his receding back, then stood quiet. Thorne sighed resignedly. The stiff neck and resolute step of the departing man plainly indicated the uselessness of remonstrance.

Then those steady rays jerked aside, darted at random, swung about in swift but futile search. Rodriguez halted in midstride, stumbled, caught footing, whirled in the dark, rifle raised. From somewhere behind all three men had broken a voice.

Hollow, sepulchral, it croaked:

"*Toda ó nada! Lleva toda ó nada!*—Take everything or nothing!"

CHAPTER XI

A DEMON SPEAKS

MOTIONLESS, breathless, the two Northerners and the Southerner stood staring into the dark. Again came the voice—

"*Toda ó nada!*"

No tongue answered. But the two streaks of light which had wavered in bewilderment turned concertedly toward the right of the cave. Then intense stillness gripped the huge black hole.

"*Toda ó nada!*" erupted the frightful tones once more. "*Y muerte!* (And death!) *Muerte!*"

The chilling threat echoed and died. A faint whisper followed—a whisper from the stiff lips of Flanagan.

"It's right over there, Thorne. I'm goin' after it!"

His torch moved forward. His bulky body advanced with catlike stealth, soundless save for slight scuffs of worn leather soles on stone. Thorne stole along at his right, to the rear. In the vagueness beyond them a low, squat shape became faintly visible. They accelerated movement, covering it with tight gripped weapons, then slowed and relaxed with a disgusted grunt from Flanagan. The thing was only a stalagmite.

"*Muerte!*" repeated the bodiless demon. "*Son muertos*— You are dead men!"

Followed a low, inhuman chuckle.

"The hell you say!" gritted Flanagan.

He sprang ahead in sudden reckless charge. Thorne, tight mouthed, kept pace with him. Two more queer figures appeared—both stalagmites. The next thing to arise before the demon hunters was the lifeless wall of the cave.

Baffled, they swung their torches from side to side and up and down, illumining nondescript bulges, hollows, folds, niches, crevices, but discerning no animate shape. The barren projections and recesses faced them in mute mockery. Then:

"*Toda ó nada! Toda ó nada!*"

The demoniac words broke from the wall itself, from a small patch of darkness some ten feet up and a little to the left. With a few rapid backward steps, the men darted their light into that spot. The radiance revealed only a ragged orifice, a scant yard wide, whence a hole receded into the solid rock. Within it was nothing; not even a bat.

"Come out o' that!" hoarsely commanded Flanagan. "Show yourself!"

A few silent seconds passed. Nothing appeared. Then the malicious voice reiterated:

"*Muertos! Muert*—"

Flanagan fired.

Three heavy bullets hammered the interior of the hole. The explosions crashed deafeningly throughout the cave, reverberated, died out.

The mysterious aperture remained unchanged. Nothing fell, nothing moved, nothing trickled down the wall beneath it. Nothing alive or dead was there, or had been.

Slowly the gunman settled back on his heels. He looked queerly at his partner, who still peered upward. A long minute crept away. The voice which had been engulfed by the roaring shots remained silent.

Thorne drew a long breath.

"Looks as if you'd blow the ghost back into his tomb," he hazarded. "And there's not much chance to follow him, and no sense in trying. So let's get back to business."

"Uh-huh," conceded his companion, somewhat reluctantly. "I'd give a couple of fistfuls of gold for a look at that yelpin' coyote. But you're right, as usual. Let's go."

He backed slowly, scowling up once more at the soundless cavity and the wall below it. That lower stone, though irregular, offered no holds for climbing; and the vacancy of the recess made manifest the futility of closer inspection.

"I want to learn more about him, too," Thorne agreed. "But he can wait. We have other things to do."

They picked their way back, turning suddenly sometimes to flash the lights behind them, then going on. Though the voice spoke no more, each felt some uncanny presence at his back, perhaps stealing up to leap and rend. But the piercing beams disclosed nothing.

Soon they discerned the gloomy bulk of the chests. Then Thorne shot his ray to the left.

"Mr. Rodriguez!" he called.

No answer came.

Again he spoke. Only the muttering echoes replied.

"Hey! Rodriguez!" bellowed Flanagan.

Louder echoes bumped about the cave.

Nothing else spoke. The boring lights found no human form.

"Buck! Come on! We've got to find him!"

"Yeah." Buck's tone was sinister. "He's made a sneak outside. And the quicker we round him up the better."

"Meaning?"

"Meanin' that him and his Indian have both got rifles, and we ain't. And there may be more guys with guns outside now than when we come in. You can trust these greasers just about half as far as you can spit—and not that far, when they're out of sight. Come on! We'd better work fast."

Thorne's lips opened, then shut tight without sound. His eyes slid to the chests, momentarily forgotten by his erstwhile gold greedy comrade. Through his nose he murmured, briefly urgent—

"M-hm."

He started away. Flanagan instantly followed suit. Together they strode fast toward the tunnel.

Their steps resounded, receded, became nothing. Once more the black heart of the Enchanted Hill held only weird, lifeless forms of stone and its demon guarded black gold.

CHAPTER XII

TWO SHOTS

FROM a hole at the base of a tall hill energed an ashen cheeked, pale lipped Spaniard. He walked fast, his mouth set in a tight line, his dilated eyes fixed straight ahead. All at once his gaze jerked aside. He halted, rifle half raised.

From shady bushes at one side of the exit had sprung two unexpected figures: one, a coppery Indian with an old rifle; the other, an anxious faced girl in riding clothes. Nearby grazed two nonchalant donkeys.

"Father!" cried the girl. She ran to him, then stopped, searching his drawn face. "Are you— Father, you are hurt? What is it?"

Her father swallowed. His gaze wavered. Then he straightened, hardened, stood rigid and stern.

"I am not hurt," he denied. "How come you here, Mariquita? I left an order—"

"And I found it, and I am here!"

Black hair tossed back, and wilful young gray eyes defied older ones. The others shifted again, to center on the Indian.

"Tomás Montez! You brought my daughter here! How dare you? You had no instructions—"

"He had instructions from me," again interrupted Mariquita. "I knew you must have come here. I made him bring me here. Now what has happened to you? Something— Tell me!"

Rodrigues looked coldly over her head toward the woods.

"Tomás, where is Pedro?" he challenged.

The Indian stared; looked at the cave mouth, seeking his brother; then replied:

"*No sé, señor.* I do not know."

"What? You have not seen him?"

"No. We have seen nobody."

The Spaniard's mouth thinned still more, as he looked again for the guide whom he had supposed to be guarding the cave entrance. Then his expression became unreadable.

"I have thirst," he tersely announced.

With that he stepped forward again, pushing Mariquita aside gently, but firmly. Looking neither right nor left, he stalked rapidly to the forest edge and faded from sight. The moment he felt himself to be lost to view he broke into a run. And the moment he reached the little brook where the packs waited he dropped his gun and fell to his knees at the edge. There, instead of quenching thirst, he plunged his hands into the water and, with frenzied haste, rubbed and scrubbed his fingers and palms. On them was a greenish black stain.

At the cave mouth Mariquita stood staring after him, her cheeks pale. Only once before had she seen her father look and act as he had just now—at the time

when he had turned from the telephone in their city home and ordered her to prepare instantly for a long journey. That day Death had been gliding swiftly toward him. Now—

"Tomás!" she cried. "Stay here and watch everything!"

Before the low murmur of assent reached her ears she was speeding away, hair flying, feet spurning the hot earth in a mad dash after her parent. Tomás, stocky, stoical, watched her, a glint of admiration in his opaque orbs, until she darted into the shadows and was gone.

Then he looked around him, now emotionless, crafty, on guard. He eyed the cryptic cave mouth and backed off. Turning, he walked to the saddled burros, kicked them, started them toward the trees. Inside the forest edge he tied both to a low branch and took his stand beside a thick trunk. There he watched.

Minutes later, two more men debouched from the tunnel. The lurking watcher tensed, then relaxed. Those two were the *Americanos* who had departed before dawn with his brother and the Señor Rodriguez. He looked beyond them for his kinsman, but saw only dark vacancy.

The outlanders paused, hands at belts, warily scanning near bush, open midground, and dark woods. Satisfied, they pushed forward.

"WE'LL find him down at the water, I think," predicted the slender Northerner.

"What would he be doin' there?" questioned the bulky one.

"When a man goes to water he usually needs to make use of it."

"Huh! Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Not a bit. Anything but."

"Well, talk plain English, then. Why would Rodriguez— Hullo, there's the Indian. Hey, Pedro! Where is—uh—*donde está Señor Rodriguez?*"

Tomás had stepped from ambush to ask the same question concerning his missing brother. Now he stood wordless, confused. After another step the interrogator stopped short.

"Look out, Thorne!" he warned. "That ain't Pedro. Looks like him, but ain't. Hey, there! Who are you? *Quién es?*"

He stood braced, ready, holding the hesitant aborigine with fixed gaze. His companion threw a swift survey around.

"I am Tomás Montez," came calm explanation. "Where is my brother?"

The white men stood puzzled in their turn. Before either framed reply, the air above them gave answer.

Two short, muffled thuds broke out, and as quickly died. The white men wheeled and looked up the hillside. The brown fellow's lips curved in a slow smile of relief.

"That is Pedro," he announced.

"How do you know?" demanded Thorne.

"It is his gun. I know it. And Pedro always shoots twice. One time he shot a man only once. The man shot back before he died. Pedro was weak a long time after that. Since then he shoots two times, quick."

"Good sense," approved Flanagan. "I always use three, myself. But what has he shot this time?"

"*No sé.* But I will go and see."

"No, you won't! You'll stay here." Suspicion again edged the hard voice. "One thing at a time. We want Rodriguez. Where is he?"

"He went into these woods. The señorita went after him."

He moved his jaw sidewise. His eyes still clung to the forested summit of the hill.

"Señorita?" sharply echoed Thorne.

"Señorita Rodriguez. I brought her here."

"Huh!" growled Flanagan. "And who else?"

"Nobody."

The Northerners eyed the trees once more. Then Thorne spoke in a different tone.

"*Muy bien.* We shall find them, Tomás. You go and find Pedro. Come on, Buck."

He stepped ahead. Flanagan, muttering something, followed. The Indian leaped from apparent lethargy into eager action. He ran across the open space and began swiftly climbing the acclivity.

The white men disappeared under the trees. The brown man vanished amid hillside bush. The burros stood patient in the shadows. Again the ground before the sinister tunnel was empty of life.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREEN STAIN

MARIQUITA RODRIGUEZ stood at the margin of the shaded stream, nervously biting a red lip and watching a man who refused response to excited questions. Felipe Rodriguez, on his knees, was deaf, dumb, blind to everything but the incessant scrubbing of his hands. At intervals he reached aside, seized earth, wet it, and rubbed the primitive scouring substance between palms already rasped to a deep pink. He seemed unable to stop.

Suddenly the girl whirled, a hand darting to the holster pendent from her carved belt.

"Don't be alarmed," said a quiet voice.

A yard away stood the two Northerners. She gave each a glance and dropped her hand. To the slender one she spoke in swift appeal.

"Señor, what ails my father? You were with him. What has happened?"

"Nothing serious," comforted Thorne, though his tone was tinged slightly with doubt. "We all had a scare, and— I'll tell you the whole story later."

He stepped to the older man, tapped a shoulder, and requested—

"Let's see them."

Rodriguez halted his strange work. He looked up, seemingly bewildered; met the steady blue gaze, held it a moment, jerked his head back to stare at his hands, which were nearly raw.

"That's enough. You've done all you can." In a tone still lower, the American added, "How do you feel?"

"Queer. Very queer," came jerky reply. "The hands seem asleep—the wrists feel a little numb—but the arms are alive—"

"All right. Good! That numbness will pass off. You've beaten it!" encouraged the other, his voice heartening at each word. His eyes, though, remained dubious. But the Spaniard did not see them. He still looked downward.

"Brace up!" whispered Thorne. "Your daughter is here."

The kneeling man stiffened. His bowed back grew straight, his neck erect, his head high. He stood sure footed, calm faced, confronting the three who had caught him in drooping crouch.

"Mariquita," he austerely began, "I told you to remain at home."

"And I did not!" flashed the girl. "Do not be simple, father. I am no longer an infant. Now tell me at once what has happened to you. You have been inside that horrible hill, and—"

"And found it to be nothing but a cave," her father cut her off. "The frightful stories are only superstitious exaggeration. But, girl, the gold is there. That is no lie. It is there! And it is ours! And soon we shall be out of reach of all the Obregón armies. Poverty and miserable existence among the animals of Ixtlatixtla are over. We go forth to live again in civilization."

Triumph rang in his voice. Responsive gladness swept the fair face upturned to his.

"Father, you are yourself again! *Bueno!*"

She paused, searching his eyes. Then she demanded:

"But tell me what came about in that place and why you have acted so strangely. If you found nothing but gold, why have you—"

"Pardon, Miss Rodriguez!" interjected Thorne. "We shall tell you everything in a little while. In the meantime we have something to discuss with your father. Mr. Rodriguez, come with us a few minutes, if you please."

"Very well."

The Spaniard nodded formally. But over his face flitted a look of relief.

"Say it here!" rebelled Mariquita.

"I'm sorry," countered Thorne. "But—"

He walked away. The other two men followed with quick strides. The girl took two steps after them, stopped, faced about, frowned at the forest, her cheeks doubly red. The cavalier departure of the men made plain the fact that, for the time, she was not wanted.

A COUPLE of rods distant the three stopped at the base of a thick *ahuehuete* tree. Thorne again studied the set face of Rodriguez. Flanagan sharply surveyed both.

"Well, what's it all about?" he quizzed. "I'm gettin' tired of the mystery. You've been pullin' me along like a bull with a ring in his nose, Thorne, but now the ring's out. Come clean!"

"That's what we're here for. First, Mr. Rodriguez, show me your hands again."

The excoriated palms rose quickly. All three looked at them—Thorne critically, Rodriguez apprehensively, Flanagan with puzzled incomprehension.

"They'll do." Thorne met the Spaniard's gaze squarely. "I think you'll pull through. I don't know just how strong the stuff is, of course. But you got rid of it soon and thoroughly. And you have strong resistance and plenty of courage. Those are good medicines for almost anything, and the only ones here. Make the most of them."

The older man nodded resolutely.

"Your prescription will be followed, doctor." He smiled, outwardly careless. "By the way, have you a cigaret?"

"Several. I'll have one myself."

"Me too." Flanagan reached to the half emptied packet in his partner's hand. "And I'm still waitin' for a light, in more ways than one."

"It's coming." The Easterner produced matches, glanced at the resentful back of the aloof Mariquita, smiled slightly. When the white rolls were aglow he became serious.

"Here it is, Buck. Mr. Rodriguez knows it, and so do I. At least we think we do. You and she—" he nodded sidewise—"don't know it yet. You will, in a minute. She'd better not."

"I got you. Shoot."

"Well, this is just a theory. But it seems to be working out. I've been figuring on it, a little at a time, ever since I first talked with Mr. Rodriguez. According to him, and also to the story Ortiz told you, the men who died after taking gold here had no wounds. And they died rather slowly. They lasted several hours, and showed no particular pain; just gradually faded out, numb all over. That's right, isn't it?"

Both listeners nodded.

"All right. Now if those chaps had no wounds, death must have come from something else than external force. And it wasn't the voice. A voice can scare a man, but it can't kill him unless he has a weak heart; and no weak hearted men would come here. If a voice convinces a man that he's going to die it helps him to die, but something else has to do the actual killing—disease, or rupture of vital organs, or poison, or what have you? So I decided on what seemed the most likely explanation. And after seeing that black gold I felt sure of it. That's why I kept you off it, Buck. I wanted to keep you off, too, Mr. Rodriguez, but you were too fast for me. To cut the story short, the key to the whole mystery of dead men is poison."

"Poison?" Flanagan paled slightly. Rodriguez's fingers twitched.

"Poison. Some infernal, insidious poison which probably was poured over those coins by the men who hid them. Some poison that enters the pores of sweaty hands and works through the whole system. Mr. Rodriguez realized it and got out and washed it off. So he's safe." An eyelid flickered warningly at Flanagan. "But nobody else before us thought of it. They were Indians or mestizos, not addicted to cleanliness, and

scared out by the voice. They went away fast, and washed hours later, if at all. So the stuff worked."

Flanagan looked at Rodriguez. Rodriguez looked stonily away, drawing a slow inhalation from his cigaret. Thorne glanced again toward Mariquita. Then said Flanagan:

"All O.K, pardner. But while you're explainin' things, what about that howlin' hyena back there? '*Toda ó nada! Muertos!*' What's he?"

"I wish I knew," confessed Thorne. "But— Hullo, who's this?"

Two forms were advancing through the woods. As the white men swung to face them, one lifted a shirted arm in casual greeting. The pair were the Indian brothers who had gone up the hill.

They came on with unhurried steps and unemotional faces, as if returning from an eventless stroll. Yet Pedro carried himself with a slight swagger, and Tomás showed big white teeth in a recurrent grin. When they stopped they stood with the self-satisfied air of men who had accomplished something laudable.

"Well, Pedro," crisply demanded Rodriguez, "have you any excuse for deserting your post?"

"*Sí, señor.*" The Indian met the displeased gaze with insouciant composure.

"What is it?"

"I have been catching the old devil of this Enchanted Hill."

His chest swelled with suddenly revealed pride. Tomás grinned again.

"*Cómo?*" puzzled the Spaniard. "You caught—what do you mean?"

"The old devil who killed men here before us. The devil who said '*Toda ó nada!*' He will not kill us. I shot him. He is dead."

CHAPTER XIV

THE DEVIL

SPEECHLESS, the Americans and the Spaniard stared at the two descendents of the Aztecs. The brown men stood at ease, their short rifles hanging loose, their gaze steady. Beyond, Mariquita watched all from the brookside. Then, determined to be no longer excluded from converse which she felt entitled to hear, she advanced with firm steps.

"Killed the devil? That sure sounds interestin'," dryly commented Flanagan. "How many times did you shoot this devil? And how come you to catch him?"

He spoke in English, and Pedro frowned, uncomprehending. Rodriguez translated.

"Two times I shot," promptly replied Pedro. "Once at the body, once at the head. I killed him twice."

Thorne nodded. Flanagan gave no sign of belief. But both remembered the double shot heard after their exit from the tunnel.

"I found him," the Indian went on, "because I heard three blows of the air from up the hill. You señores all were long gone in the cave. There ought to be no man shooting up there. I went to find the shooter. He was in a hollow place on the top. He had no gun that I could see. But he talked to the rocks. He said 'All or none!' and 'You are dead men!' and things like that. So I knew he must be the old devil of this place and that he was putting his curse on you señores down below. So I shot him before he could see me and kill me with that curse. He fell down dead. That is all."

"That's a mouthful, I'll say," muttered Flanagan.

"Rather," commented Thorne. "But there's one thing loose in his yarn. Pedro, if the devil had no gun how did he fire those three shots?"

"*No sé.* But I heard them."

"That's easy," explained Flanagan. "He heard me shootin' inside there—"

"But he says the noises came from the top, not from the tunnel."

"He didn't hear straight. I guess he ain't talkin' straight, either. I want to see that devil."

"So do I," seconded Rodriguez. "Pedro, we will go to look at your demon. Tomás, remain here and keep watch. The señorita—"

"The señorita can take care of herself, father!" rebuked a voice at his shoulder. "And she is going up there with you. *Vamonos!*"

Gray eyes conflicted. Blue and brown ones watched. Thorne suggested:

"Maybe you'd better stay here, sir, and rest a bit. It's a hard climb, and—well, you understand."

"Too well, señor! I will not rest! I can not rest! I will move while I am able! Pedro! *Vaya!*"

He strode forward, mouth set. Mariquita stood a second, eyes clouding with sudden resurgence of anxiety, then followed. Thorne shrugged. He and his partner and the aborigines moved toward the hill.

The party crossed the open and began the climb, the brown men ascending with no evidence of effort, the others with more exertion. Rodriguez, in particular, made much labor of his progress, but seemed to do so with deliberate purpose. Flanagan, watching him, muttered to Thorne:

"He's usin' his head, workin' hard and sweatin' free. That might help a lot."

"If he can stand it," conceded the other.

Rodriguez stood it. All clambered steadily onward. The slope was steep, thickly wooded, impeded here and there by juts of rock. Sunlight, spraying through a canopy of leaves, struck with enfeebled force on the ground. The soil was much damper than in the sun smitten open space left behind, and, at times, decidedly wet. Once Rodriguez slipped and stumbled in a muddy depression; but he caught footing immediately, and pressed on with firmer step. When the crest was reached he was breathing hard, but still unconquered by any toxins in his blood.

Pedro, with unerring sense of direction, led through the tall timber. Soon he waved an admonitory hand. A minute or two later he paused, pointing.

"*Allí*," he directed.

UNEXPECTEDLY the others found themselves on the edge of a shallow, shrunken pond, enclosed by short but steep walls of rock. A few rods away, hardly visible, stood a weatherbeaten house. At this Pedro's finger was pointing. Now he ambled toward it. And, though he had declared that the "devil" was dead, he walked with instinctive wariness.

The hovel was crude, but solidly built, and constructed for permanence. Its low walls were stone, its roof a thick thatch. It snuggled against a perpendicular face of the pool surrounding rock. Blending with cliff and woods, it was a covert wherein man or beast—or demon—might pass a lifetime undetected and unsuspected.

Yet now it held no tenant. Its primitive door of woven sticks stood open and, when the party reached it, a look through the portal revealed no human or bestial shape inside. Pedro moved onward, with the laconic information—

"Farther."

Several yards past the vacant lair he stopped at a concavity in the cliff—a wide, funnel shaped indentation, fringed at the base by low brush. Mutely he pointed downward. The men grouping around him beheld the creature he had slain.

Sprawled on one side lay a scrawny, ragged man with matted gray hair and long unkempt beard; a man lean to the point of emaciation, whose disordered arms and legs were hardly more than bones, and whose outflung hands resembled dirty talons of some bird of prey. Yellow teeth, showing between lax lips, seemed a-grin with undying malice.

For a long minute the adventurers eyed the body. Then Thorne looked around. Mariquita had stopped a few paces behind the rest, and now stood gazing rigidly across the pond, her cheeks pale. He followed her look, seeing only motionless water and stone and trees. Nothing else was there. No life moved or spoke. Not a leaf rustled. Silence brooded over the whole hill.

The Easterner's eyes roved along the

rock wall, came back to the immediate foreground, paused on the depression a few feet away. In it was a hole. As he studied that aperture a light of comprehension grew on his face. Then Flanagan spoke.

"If this is a devil, it don't look much like what I'd expect. I'd say 'twas just a poor old nut."

"I think it was both," slowly answered Thorne, still contemplating the upstanding funnel. "Pedro, this demon talked to the rock?"

"*Sí, señor.* He stood facing that place there." A short gesture indicated the indentation. "He spoke loud. He said—"

"Never mind. You have told us that. But you heard him plainly?"

"*Sí.* That is how I found him. His voice came strong across the water."

"M-hm. Well, gentlemen, I think that, thanks to Pedro, we've solved the whole mystery now."

The others waited. He looked again at the dead hermit, the hole, and the surroundings.

"Well, shoot the works," urged Flanagan.

"Soon. But first look carefully at that hole there. And notice that there's a regular path here under foot. This fellow has been coming here hundreds of times from his house. Maybe the track goes farther. I'm going to find out. Mr. Rodriguez, will you and Mari— I mean Miss Rodriguez—will you two wait a few minutes at the house? I'll be back presently."

He nudged the Spaniard, who turned to look at his aloof daughter, then walked back to her. Thorne promptly started away, eyes on the path. Flanagan and the Indian pair followed close.

Past the funnel, the foot track grew much less plain. But it still was visible. It led along the waterside, turned sharply, ascended a slanting fold in the rock, went on southward. The trees became scattered and stunted, sank to bushes, ended in barren, sun scorched soil. The path also faded out.

Continuing straight ahead, the exploring four found themselves looking out across the *malpaís* which they had traversed earlier in the day; the mile of lava and starved vegetation wherein only rattlesnakes made their home. In a small hollow at the edge was a flimsy hut of poles and leaves, old, brown, yet efficient as a sunshade.

"A lookout place," judged Flanagan.

"Exactly. It commands the whole flat out there, which is the natural way of approach to this place. Well, let's go back."

No more was said until the hidden house was reached. Rodriguez, stiffly watchful, stood against the wall. Mariquita sat nearby on a shaded stone at the edge of the pond, chin in hand.

The Northerners looked inside the hovel, then left it uninvaded. It held only the most meager necessities, and it was unfragrant. All walked a few yards farther on, to stop beside a thick tree. There five pairs of eyes concentrated on Thorne.

"NOW I think I can tell you the entire story of this Enchanted Hill," he offered. "Anyway, I'll try. As I see it, it goes like this:

"Thousands or millions of years ago this hill took shape through volcanic action. It's a freak; but there are plenty of freaks in Mexico. Now there's a pond on top, a cave underneath; a dry side where nothing grows, a damp side covered with woods. A spring comes up here somewhere and makes a pool. The pool seeps very slowly through its floor and forms stalactites and stalagmites. Also, it leaks down one side. That makes the trees. The other side is impervious. So it grows nothing.

"Within the last four hundred years, since Cortez conquered this country, some Spaniards discovered this place. Within the last hundred years—about the time Mexico won independence from Spain—some man or men had to use the cave as a safe deposit vault. He, or they, made the deposit and took all precautions to protect it. Then he, or they, got out

and, probably, got shot. Anyway, he or they never came back.

"Within the last fifty years, probably the last thirty, somebody, or several somebodies, rediscovered the cave and what was in it; also, discovered that its contents were dangerous. Probably at least one man died. At any rate, one man was left, and he didn't dare touch the stuff. But he was determined to let nobody else get it. So he explored everything, discovered a good deal more, and made use of what he learned. He built this house. He lived off the forest behind here. He watched for any one else who might come. And if he didn't happen to see them coming he heard them after they entered the cave. Then he—"

"Hey! Hold everything!" objected Flanagan. "How'd he hear 'em?"

"By wireless. I'll prove it when I'm ready.

"As I was saying, he saw them or heard them. By the time the first ones came he had worked out his campaign of terrorism. He had plenty of time to experiment with it, if the story you told me in the city was correct. You said this place and its gold and its voice were found about twenty years ago, didn't you?"

"That's what old Ortiz said," confirmed his fellow. Rodriguez, too, nodded affirmation.

"Well, that house is more than twenty years old, as you can see if you study the walls a minute. So this fellow was here before those others came. He had gone insane, of course. But, with insane cunning, he used the most effective weapon he had. He let them find the treasure and handle it, knowing what it would do to them. Then he used his voice. And the few who lived to reach Ixtlatixtla told about the voice before they died. So this hill got its reputation of infernal enchantment; and its devil kept his gold.

"Now look over yonder. That flat funnel where Pedro caught that poor devil is a natural loud speaker. And the hole, unless I'm all wrong, is a natural telephone that goes down to the cave. It brings up all sounds from below, and carries down a voice from above. And the noises coming up are broadcast from the funnel straight at this house, and a good deal farther, if they're loud enough. When you fired your .45 into the lower end awhile ago Pedro heard the shots away down at the edge of the woods. You nearly blew the eardrums out of the devil, too. That's why he didn't speak again for awhile. By the time he started doing his stuff again Pedro was up and at him. And that's the end of my story."

A protracted stillness ensued, while the whites studied the shallow cone in the wall. Then said Rodriguez:

"You have it right, Mr. Thorne. It all rings true. *Bien.* Now that the devil is dead, let us go back to our own world. We have worldly things to consider."

With a tight smile which held little mirth, he walked away. Mariquita and the Indians followed, silent. Thorne and Flanagan moved after them, then paused, looking back at the house, then at each other.

"You go on," gruffly prompted Flanagan.

"All right."

The Easterner proceeded, watching the progress of Rodriguez. His partner strode back along the pond, stooped over the crazed old man who had given his soul to the guarding of a treasure which he could never enjoy; picked him up, and carried him to the house. There he laid him straight and peaceful on his crude bed. Then he backed out and firmly shut the door.

CHAPTER XV

A POT BOILS

BESIDE the shadowed stream in the woodland, hammocks hung and a fire burned.

In one of the hammocks lay Rodriguez, asleep. In the one next to it sat Mariquita, alternately watching her father and the pair of Northerners who squatted beside the small blaze. On that flame rested the clay pot which, that morning, had held

nourishing *frijoles*, but which now contained something far different, something being carefully and thoroughly boiled.

The dark faced brothers were elsewhere. Pedro, demon slayer, stood again in ambush at the edge of the open ground, keeping drowsy but efficient vigil. Tomás had departed. By this time he was in the forest beyond the *malpaís*, plodding along with his burro toward Ixtlatixtla.

Food, fatigue, noonday heat, and lifelong habit of siesta had combined to overcome the Spaniard despite himself. Other contributory causes were perhaps the absorption of a small amount of lethargizing poison and reaction from severe nerve strain on finding it not lethal. By the time he returned to the impromptu campground he had realized that the terrifying numbness of wrists and hands was noticeably abating. So, after combating his sleepiness for some time, he had finally surrendered to it.

"It may be the best thing you can do," counseled Thorne. "And you'll wake up, I promise you. If you don't come out of your nap when you ought to we'll bring you out of it, if we have to give you the bastinado."

He smiled as he spoke, but his voice was serious. And Rodriguez, after a straight look at both men and a glance at his girl, responded—

"Gentlemen, I put my trust in you."

"You're puttin' it in the right place," crustily returned Flanagan.

Rodriguez smiled wearily, lay down, and lost consciousness at once.

"And there's a lesson for you, Buck," quietly said Thorne. "When a man trusts you all the way, why can't you do the same to him?"

"Don't rub it in, Thorne. Gold's gold, and Mexes are Mexes; but I'm back of this guy now till the last dog dies. I was off him for awhile, but now I'm with him. He's as game as they come, and I'm bettin' he's a square shooter."

"Glad to hear you say it. That's been my bet from the start."

Then they went about their queer task of cooking; queer, because they had already eaten, and because the substance they cooked was extremely inedible and totally indigestible.

Before this, however—before Rodriguez had yielded to Morpheus, before any one had eaten the frugal provender taken from the packs—a council had been held. Discussion had crystallized certain inescapable facts, which, when recognized, caused the departure of Tomás. Now the mission of that dependable servitor was to procure and bring back as many donkeys, as many strong sacks, and as much tanned hide and strong thread as he could get together; also, to bring more food; and, still more important, to keep his mouth shut.

The burros and the bags were to carry the gold to Ixtlatixtla, and beyond. There was no other route by which it could be moved. The faint trail which the adventurers had followed that morning led only to a deserted, earthquake ruined village farther back in the mountains, whence was no exit. In order to reach the outer world, therefore, the ancient treasure must travel through the town of the Zapatistas. If it could reach that village unheralded it might pass unmolested, if taken through the place late at night. If not, the probable fight for its ownership could be attended to when it arose.

Concerning this probability the Spaniard was blunt.

"They will seize it if they can," he predicted. "They all are robbers. They know the story of this Enchanted Hill, and I have little doubt that they suspect that we now are here. They saw my daughter leave in haste, and they have learned everything the woman Concha, my housekeeper, knows. She is a snake, like all the other mestizas there. When Tomás arrives they will try to pump him dry of all the information he has. But they will have no success. Neither he nor Pedro has any love for any one there. These brothers are Indians of the country beyond here, not natives of the town. However, the gentlemen of Ixtlatixtla will suspect and expect. And if they see that we have won the devil's treasure—"

He shrugged his strong Latin shoulders.

"I shall have no influence over them then," he concluded. "They have respected me thus far. But when gold is within reach they respect nothing."

Before this contingency need be dealt with, however, it was necessary to transport the hoard to Ixtlatixtla. But before it could be transported it must be loaded on the beasts of burden. And, since those tiny beasts could not carry the ponderous old coffers, it must be sacked. Sacking meant handling. Handling of the coins, without protection, meant death. Therefore a protection had been devised. The hides and the thread which Pedro was to get were to be cut and sewn into thick gloves.

So now, with all arrangements made, Rodriguez slept peacefully. And Pedro watched against possible spies from the town. And Mariquita watched the outlanders, and the aliens watched their pot. In that pot were the blackened coins which had come from the cave in the Spaniard's pocket. The pocket, too, was there, cut away bodily from the garment in order to evade the touch of the deadly disks. And, as the fire burned and the water boiled, cloth and metal gradually cleaned themselves of contagion.

The thought of rendering innocuous all the rest of the hoard by the same method had naturally suggested itself, but had been quickly dismissed. Such a process would require larger boilers and consume much time. The one imperative need now was speedy removal to some spot far from the ken of Ixtlatixtla.

"I'M WONDERIN'," ruminated Flanagan, sliding a dry stick into the fire, "if that guy Tomás won't sell us out. Rodriguez thinks he's the goods, but maybe if they slip him a few drinks over there—"

"Oh, he'll make good," impatiently interrupted Thorne. "He's no fool."

"Yes," chimed an unexpected voice, clear and confident. "You can rely on Tomás."

Mariquita, reassured by her father's tranquil breathing, had arisen and come close, unperceived. Flanagan started, reddened, opened his lips, closed them. He flushed still more when she stepped to the other side of the fire, looked him straight in the eye, and coolly questioned—

"Don't you trust anybody at all?"

He poked in another stick, using unnecessary care. Then he looked up combatively.

"Yup. One!"

"Who?"

"Him!" He nodded toward Thorne.

"Oh. Yes, of course." She gave the Easterner a smile. "And nobody else?"

"Well—uh—sure. Your father."

"I am glad." This time she smiled at him. "But, nobody else?"

"Oh, maybe. One or two fellers, here and there, mostly there, and a long ways off. These Indians may be O.K, but I'll let 'em prove it."

"They will. But there is one more person present, Mr. Flanagan."

He stared a second. Her lips twitched provocatively. He grinned.

"Oh, you? Sure, I'd trust you, señorita —but not too far."

"What?" Her head rose sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Nothin', except you could make an awful fool of a man that didn't watch his step. I'm watchin' mine. I always do. Try Thorne. He's easier."

"Say, say!" remonstrated Thorne. "Roll over, Buck. You're talking in your sleep."

The girl contemplated them both in one fleeting second—Flanagan sardonic, Thorne embarrassed. Suddenly she laughed, clearly, merrily, yet not loudly; then, quick and graceful, sank to kneel facing them at their own crouching height.

"Your compliments to me and each other are—er—what you call the reverse English, yes?" she bantered. "But never mind. You must tell me something. You have not trusted me at all. I have been a doll walking behind you, but a doll with eyes and ears, señores!" Her tone now

was serious. "And I have the right to know everything. I think I know it now, but I must be sure. What came to my father—and to you—in that cave?"

Her grave gaze searched theirs. Thorne returned it candidly. Flanagan, mouth shut, left explanation to him.

"You're quite right," acknowledged the blue eyed American. "Buck, feed the fire a couple of minutes and do penance for your untimely wit. Mar—er—Miss Rodriguez, let's step over to the water. It's cooler there."

He stood, somewhat stiff muscled as the result of his prolonged squat. She arose with agile ease. Both moved waterward.

"Look out, Arky Ologist," warned Flanagan, sotto voce. "You ain't the only one that can dig."

"Meaning?" Thorne wheeled, frowning.

"Oh, nothin'. Only when I hear you startin' to tell about your past I'll heave a hot stick at your neck. It don't pay."

"Humph!"

Thorne stalked away, Mariquita gliding beside him. The distance to the water was only a few feet, the ground clear, the girl sure footed. But the Easterner offered his arm, and she not only accepted it but leaned on it.

"Humph!" loudly mocked Flanagan, with a wicked grin. Then, as Thorne's head turned, he scowled at the fire and rammed still another length of fuel under the pot.

At the margin the pair sat down side by side, hands clasped over updrawn knees, backs to the fire. And there Thorne told the entire story of the occurrences in the cave. When he finished, the girl arose hastily and went to look again at the sleeping man. Reassured, she returned and dropped into her former place. For a moment she gazed soberly into the untamed woods across the water.

"GOLD, gold, gold!" she suddenly rebelled. "Poison and shooting and stabbing and torture and misery and oppression —all for gold! It is so all over Mexico. Is there any place free from this beastly greed for gold?"

Thorne hesitated, eyeing her sidewise, then answered:

"I don't know of any. Gold or its equivalent is necessary to life, it seems. But there are places where people are not so savage in getting it. Have you ever been in the States?"

"No. Father has been there, and in Europe. But I have not traveled, except to Ixtlatixtla."

A light laugh ended her statement. But under it was the same note of rebellion.

"You speak English very well."

"Oh, we have an English school and an American school in Mexico City," she explained. "And I know several American girls at the Lomas, the American colony beyond Chapultepec Park, you know."

"Yes, I know. Well, now you will soon be back there, probably."

She shook her head decisively.

"No. Father does not wish to return. Neither do I. He might make his peace with Obregón, or he might not. But why go back to the same things we have left? Insecurity, political intrigue, persecution, revolution and destruction always hovering. No! We would rather live in some other part of the world, at least for a time."

"Well, then, maybe we can all go together to the States."

"Could we?" She leaned nearer.

"Well, that's where Buck and I intend to go—er—I mean I intend to, and I guess he will. There are a few things to be overcome first, of course, but after that—"

Plop! Sssss! A half burned stick struck the water, hissed in extinguishment, floated away. From behind came a saturnine voice:

"Dig in your heels. You're slippin'. And our cookin's done."

Annoyance passed over the face of the sitting man. Color deepened in the cheeks near his own. Then both arose in silence.

As they turned, they found Flanagan dumping the contents of the pot on the ground. And, as they reached his side, they saw that the light pocket which had gone into the container was stained a

venomous green; that the stick which had been used for stirring was darkened at the end; that even the earth where the water had been outpoured showed a thin coating of slime. Now the cook jabbed a knife point into the cloth pouch and shook out its contents. The coins which clinked forth were still dark, but obviously stripped of their noxious veneer.

With a bit of wood and some dirt Flanagan rubbed one of the disks until both sides were bright; then picked it up and peered at it. It now was honest yellow gold.

"Old stuff," he announced. "Nearly two hundred years. Date is 1740. Funny kind of a stamp on it, but it's gold, pardner, regular gold! If it's all like this—ten chests of it—"

He swallowed noisily, then was silent, gloating on the consummation of the dreams which had beckoned him onward through hard weeks. Thorne's eyes, too, shone. But his conclusion of the unfinished sentence was a dry jest.

"We won't have to shine up any more coppers, anyway."

"Ho-ho-ho! You bet! We're off that for life!"

They chuckled together, contemplating the scattered *columnarias* minted in the long vanished time of domination by Spain. Mariquita, on the other hand, eyed the time stained metal distastefully and drew away from the smeared spot on the ground. Then she glanced toward her father and walked quickly to look down into his placid face. Reassured, she sat again in her hammock.

Thus left, Thorne crouched near his partner, and both worked at cleaning the tarnish from the other coins. Mariquita watched them, then lay back and let her gaze lift to the boughs and her thoughts drift far away. Although the treasure of the Enchanted Hill lacked power to conjure up in her mind the same visions seen by the men, she was not without her own dreams. And, as the siesta hours drowsed along, Spanish gold and Spanish fancy built for her a castle fair, not in Spain, but in a country nearer, at the North.

CHAPTER XVI

THE NIGHT TRAIL

SLANTING moonlight thinly illuminated the Enchanted Hill, the mirrorlike pool cupped in the crest, a wall of the shut stone house. It peered at the vacant entrance of the tunnel at the base, and sieved through a leafy canopy to spot an abandoned camp site beside the brook. It found no life.

The weird *cerro* was deserted, its uncanny cave looted, its looters gone. On its top, its demon lay in the tomb he had built for himself. In its black bowels lay the ancient chests which he had guarded—empty.

Miles away, a train of burdened burros plodded along a dim trail. Ahead of it trudged three armed white men and a white girl. Behind it walked two gun bearing brown men, keeping the balky animals in motion with the ease of born *arrieros*. By some unexplained gift of Nature, a brown or black driver can control donkeys far better than a white one.

At length the leaders stopped. The burros, always willing to halt, stopped also. For once, their drivers did not urge them on. Instead, they came forward.

A short distance ahead stood a low, leaning cross, marking the old grave of some man found dead beside the trail and buried where he had fallen. The identity of that unfortunate, his fate, his sepulture, all were of no interest to these night travelers. The neglected cross served now only as a guide to the watchful Spaniard who formed the point of the advance guard. He knew that, a quarter mile beyond, stood the first house of the hamlet of Ixtlatixtla. So did the Indians who now came to his side.

"Pedro, go forward," he commanded, "and make sure that the way is open. We wait here."

Without answer, the scout proceeded. His brother Tomás, equally taciturn, began a patrol up and down the line of donkeys to keep them from braying. The others picked convenient spots for rest by

the wayside. Then, for some time, all were silent.

Rodriguez listened constantly toward the settlement, his rifle gripped in hands unrelaxing, though still tender. The past two days had restored full confidence in himself. Mariquita, a short distance from him, gazed at the moonlit distance, a-thrill with the sense of adventure. Thorne, close beside her, looked sidewise at intervals, studying her rapt face, then away again. Flanagan, a yard farther on, coolly inspected his pistol.

Time dragged. Pedro had been gone long enough to walk to the settlement and back at least twice. Rodriguez showed increasing impatience. The others shifted positions. At length, without sound, the absentee reappeared.

"Where have you been so long?" demanded the Spaniard.

"Looking at everything and learning everything," came unperturbed reply. "It took time."

"Well?"

"Not well. We can not go through."

"What?" Rodriguez stood up, scowling.

"No. We can go in but not out. The place is a trap. Men guard the other end of the town. They hold the road to the river. They are six, and they are wide awake. We can go to your house, señor, if we move quick and quiet. Beyond there, no!"

"Who are those men?"

"I saw José Velez and Pancho Escandón. The other faces were not plain."

The Spaniard gritted his teeth. Those names evidently were formidable. Thorne and Flanagan eyed him. Recklessly the latter broke out:

"Shoot it out with 'em! Down 'em quick and keep goin'."

"Back up, Buck," interjected Thorne. "We might chance it if we had horses. But we have donkeys, slow and loaded to the limit. By the time we blow those chaps off the map, what's the rest of the town doing? And with the donks to handle, where are we?"

"Sunk," admitted his partner. "But what else'll we do?"

"Well, we might try leaving the burros here and sneaking up on those fellows and capturing them quietly."

"No," dissented Rodriguez, though with manifest reluctance. "That can not be done. Those two murderers, Pancho and José, can never be captured. They will shoot. Then the town will be on us like a pack of wild dogs. We must go to my house."

"And then what?" challenged Flanagan.

"Then we shall at least be inside strong walls. And the sooner we reach them the better."

His glance went to his daughter. Thorne nodded.

"You're right," he crisply agreed. "Let's go."

"*Bien.* But a word first: We must go as if we did not suspect any trap. Quietly, of course, and carefully. That is natural. But we shall seem to watch the houses and to give little attention to the road at the other end. We shall stop at my house as if only halting there a few minutes to get something. Then these *arrieros* will unload with all speed."

"All right," assented Thorne. Flanagan scowled, but said nothing.

IN SWIFT Spanish, Rodriguez gave instructions to the brothers. They muttered comprehension and walked back along the donkey line. The treasure train resumed advance.

The trail crept gradually under foot. The first house came into sight—lightless, lifeless, long abandoned. Then the road curved past a huge boulder and straightened into the street of the town.

Low houses on either side watched darkly from under broad trees, their black windows and doors staring like misshapen eyes. But if any tenant of any of those crude dwellings also watched from within, he remained hidden. No peering face showed itself. No voice called question or command. Not even a dog barked. To all appearance, every creature in Ixtlatixtla was engulfed in sleep.

Rodriguez, holding his place at the head of the column, walked with deliberate stride, rifle swaying easily in one hand, attitude careless. Thorne and Flanagan, flanking him a pace at the rear, marched as if weary, hats shoved back, heads drooping a little, hands empty. Mariquita, screened behind their three bodies, followed without pretense of either fatigue or inattention. Her wide eyes shone with excitement, and her steps were quick, short, impetuous. The burros, too, moved a little more briskly than before, probably sensing nearness to their homes. The disordered tramp of their small hoofs, however, made little sound, for the soft earth of the unpaved road muffled the impacts.

House after house snailed behind. The plaza opened. The stone domicile of Rodriguez stood forth, bleak and forbidding in the cool mountain moonlight. With the same unhurried gait, though with growing restraint of taut nerves, the clandestine travelers approached it. Their searching eyes found the road beyond it empty.

"Looks like we could go right ahead," muttered Flanagan.

"Yes, it looks so," murmured Rodriguez. "They are not fools."

The other scowled, still studying the temptingly open route; but he withheld further words.

They reached the Spaniard's *fortín*—little fort—and stopped. Rodriguez himself spread arms wide in signal to halt, then spoke again. His tone, cunningly pitched, was not loud, yet carried far in the stillness.

"A few minutes, friends, and we shall go on," he lied. "Give me time to gather a few things valuable to me. Mariquita, get your dresses, but be quick. We must not linger here. Señores, will you keep watch?"

"Sure. But work fast," replied Flanagan, in Spanish.

"We shall."

The older man's teeth glinted. Then he strode to his door, where Mariquita had already inserted the heavy key and turned the lock. Meanwhile the Indians bunched the burros. The Americans walked a few feet ahead and began an impromptu sentry-go, as if heading off the donkeys from further advance and maintaining vigilance against the town. Their moving shapes gave ambushed eyes something to look at. And, as they patrolled, the brown men began unloading the animals.

Those brothers simply faded from sight behind the herd. They sank, crept, plied swift knives, severed ropes, dragged sacks off equine backs, and, still crouching, conveyed heavy burdens to the open doorway. Their movements were hidden behind the huddle of asses. At the door two pairs of Spanish hands reached low to seize the bags and drag them inside. The stooping porters rapidly returned for other loads. Not once did they rise above the level of the grouped backs of patient brutes. Meanwhile the Northerners beyond them continued their moving camouflage.

The river road remained innocently open and silent. If men lurked there, it was not to their interest to arouse the town just yet. Spoils belong to the victor. Men who summon help to win victory must share the spoils. With unsuspicious victims about to walk into ambush, only fools would halve their gains. Therefore the vacant road and the empty night waited for the victims to come on.

JUST as the last burro was relieved of its burden, however, something aroused suspicion. Perhaps a knife blade flashed in the moonshine, or a face came too far out of the doorway, or the absence of light in the house woke belated thought. At any rate, the sterile highway suddenly spawned men.

Half a dozen shapes magically appeared where no life had been. They advanced with assumed nonchalance, as if they were only a party of delayed homecomers from the river. But they were not good actors. Their shoulders and necks

were too rigid, their steps too purposeful to fit their rôles. And the seemingly sleepy sentries were much more alert than they looked.

"Here they are," warned Thorne.

"Yeah. But don't notice 'em yet," counseled Flanagan. "Back off and get behind the burros. I'm comin'." Then, a little louder, "Hey, Rodriguez! All set?"

"Yes!" came immediate response. "Come in! Pedro! Tomás! Hurry!"

The brothers, carrying the two final sacks, rose higher and rushed. They pitched their burdens inside, to fall with a loud thump and clink. Instantly they whirled and dived toward their rifles, left lying beyond the burros. At the same moment the Northerners backed rapidly around the donkeys, facing the oncoming group with unswerving vigilance. As they went, Flanagan added from the side of his mouth:

"We're in for a war. The guy that hits first lasts longest. Don't wait for declarations accordin' to Hoyle. I'm shootin' the minute I get behind cover."

"I'm with you all the way."

As they cleared the burro barrier the oncoming Mexicans, still silent, quickened their pace to double time. Rifles rose.

Flanagan leveled his pistol. But, fast as he was, one of the enemy was faster. A red flash spat from the dark knot of assailants. A loud shock crashed in the quietude.

"Rotten!" mocked Flanagan. "Missed me by a mile!"

With that he retaliated.

From his gun leaped a stream of fire. Biting reports smashed the night like the beating of riveting hammers. Others blended. Thorne, beside him, emptied his own pistol. Duller concussions pounded from the rifles of the brothers Montez and that of the Spaniard. From the guns of the Ixtlatixtlans darted other flashes and detonations. A burro screamed. Then came sudden silence.

The Zapatistas were down, sprawling, still. So was Pedro Montez. Three donkeys had fallen dead. Another lay kicking. The rest stampeded.

The defenders, swept back by the rushing animals, steadied and glared around. No visible foes remained alive. But from roundabout resounded barks of alarmed dogs, bangs of violently opened doors. Ixtlatixtla was awake.

"Inside!" shouted Rodriguez. "At once!"

Then, passing his rifle to Mariquita, he leaped to the fallen Indian. Together he and Flanagan lifted the limp body and ran heavily inward. Thorne snatched up Pedro's rifle and followed. Tomás, hissing between his teeth, sidled after him, menacing with empty gun several dark shapes converging toward the house. Then a hand grabbed him, yanked him into darkness. The thick door thumped shut.

CHAPTER XVII

ATTACK

BULLETS thudded into the ponderous barrier which had just interposed between the gold and the gold hungry outlaws of Ixtlatixtla. Heavy slugs, fired from large-bored guns, struck with murderous force. But against that dense slab of tropic wood, almost as invulnerable as steel, the leaden balls were impotent.

Within, stout bolts slid home with rattle and bump. Lights flashed from the torches of the Americans, flitting about the wide living room in search of any unsecured windows or doors. At every narrow window the wooden shutter was barred. The doors—

Rodriguez grabbed the light from Thorne, sprang over the low huddle of money sacks, dashed rearward, seeking the back door which gave access to and from the patio.

"It is bolted, father!" called Mariquita. "I made all fastenings myself before I left. Everything is secured."

No answer came, except the scuff of rapid footsteps. The master of the house meant to assure himself of the solidity of every bolt and bar.

Flanagan handed his torch to Mariquita and reloaded his pistol. Thorne replenished his own weapon. Mariquita swept the light around once more. A brown hand plucked it from her grasp.

Tomás Montez, silent, set mouthed, stepped with it to his brother, who lay against the bags. A moment he stooped. Then he stood up slowly, stiffly, with dumb misery in his eyes.

"*Muerte?*" asked Thorne.

Tomás made no answer. He only handed the cylinder to its owner. Thorne centered its ray on the fallen man, then turned it away. Pedro, demon slayer, lay dead against the gold which he had helped to win from that demon.

"Tough luck!" growled Flanagan. "He was a good guy. But the greasers that got him went with him. That gang is all through."

Nobody replied.

More blows pounded on the street door —blows of bullets. The barrier gave forth dull shocks of sound, but hardly quivered. Then a louder report thundered in the room. Something struck viciously on the clay wall beyond the startled four.

"Stand clear!" barked Flanagan. "Some gorilla is shootin' through the keyhole!"

All stepped farther aside. Then Tomás, sudden savage fury in his face, seized his brother's carbine from the table, where Thorne had laid it, levered a cartridge from magazine to barrel, leaped to the door, planted the muzzle against the keyhole, and fired. It was a mere mad impulse of vengefulness, but not futile. Something outside bumped hard against the sill.

Flanagan laughed harshly and slapped his thigh.

"Lucky shot!" he exulted. "Some greaser was just takin' a peek and got his. Dumb luck—"

"Here! Stop him!" snapped Thorne. "Tomás, you fool—"

He bounded to the door, Flanagan after him. Berserk, the Indian had dropped the rifle and was drawing a bolt, preparatory to leaping out and attacking the enemies with his machete. Before he could achieve his suicidal purpose he was clutched and flung back.

Staggering, snarling, utterly unreasoning, he grasped the hilt of his long knife and pulled. Then he fell and lay dazed, knocked flat by Flanagan's fist.

When he sat up, clasping his jaw and looking confusedly around, he found himself disarmed and under inflexible watch of stern eyes. Rodriguez, back from his rapid tour of inspection, stood menacingly before him. The others grouped close around the master of the house.

"What is this?" demanded the Spaniard. "What was he attempting to do? Turn traitor?"

"No, father!" defended Mariquita. "He lost his head because Pedro is dead. He tried to go out and kill the whole pack of wolves. Tomás! You will be sensible now, yes?"

The bewildered brown gaze turned to her, steadied, cleared. The brown features became composed.

"*Sí, señorita.*"

"*Bueno!* We rely on you, Tomás," she encouraged. "You would have been killed. *Comprende?* Instead you must live—"

"And work with us to kill those dogs yonder," finished her father. "Come! Get up!"

THE INDIAN arose, once more docile and outwardly phlegmatic. He did not look again toward his kinsman. The fatalism of his long subjugated race had come to his aid; and, though the ferocity of the Aztecs might still smoulder in his brain, he had regained control of himself. His calmness proved him to be once more dependable.

Rodriguez, however, continued to watch him, a peculiar expression growing in his face. Mariquita touched his arm.

"He is trustworthy, father."

"*Sí.* I was thinking." He paused a second. "A trustworthy traitor. Hm!"

"But he did not mean—"

"I know, *chiquita.*" He lifted a hand

and caressed her hair. Musingly he continued, "A trustworthy traitor is sometimes more useful than many bullets. Yes. Quite so."

Bang! Spat! From the keyhole crashed another report, from the farther wall sprang another spurt of clay. Mariquita, who had felt the breath of the passing bullet on her arm, shrank against her father. Rodriguez spun about, wrath darkening his face. Thorne whirled, steely anger in his eyes, and fired hastily. The bullet made its black record six inches from the lock.

"Rotten," commented Flanagan. Aiming light and pistol with swift certitude, he fired three times. Two stains appeared close to the small target. The third bullet did not register. It had gone through the mark.

"Missed, I s'pose," he deprecated. "The sneak that tried snipin' us this time wouldn't stand there like the first one. He'd dodge quick. But that'll hold 'em a minute. Meanwhiles, let's move."

All moved with speed. And Rodriguez, voice hoarse with rage, commanded:

"Tomás! Bring here the ladder! On the wall in the corridor you will find it." He pointed toward the rear. "Hurry!"

The Indian went. The Spaniard ground his teeth, scowling at the door. The Americans looked in the same direction, tense, though they knew that no further missiles from that quarter could strike anything but the wall. Mariquita laughed quickly, nervously, yet without fear.

"Nobody can hurt us," she reminded them. "Even if they ruin the lock, there are the bolts."

"*Sí*, but it is time those filthy beasts were driven off!" rasped her father. "And they soon will be! Tomás! Where in the name of all the horned demons is that snail? Tomás!"

"*Aquí*," came stolid reply.

Tomás re-entered, stepping fast, carrying a short but strong ladder. Thorne's eyes and torch lifted. In the ceiling was a trapdoor.

"Good!" approved Flanagan. "I'm gettin' fed up on this indoor sport. Up and at 'em. Let's go!"

The ladder went up. So did Rodriguez. He heaved the door open. In the square opening showed light and stars. He scrambled through and disappeared.

The Americans followed swiftly. The Indian hesitated, looked into his rifle, ejected an empty shell, looked helplessly about. The shot he had fired in blind fury had been the last in the gun. He had no reloads.

"Go up!" commanded Mariquita. "I will bring bullets. Go!"

He obeyed at once. She picked up Thorne's torch, lying on the table, and ran into another room. In a moment she came back, bearing not only cartons of cartridges but a rifle. Dropping the light, she mounted the rungs. Gun in one hand, bullet boxes in the other, she ascended with agile ease, preserving equilibrium by sliding her hands up the smooth side pieces. As she went, shots broke out overhead.

The four men of different nations were in the squatty but impregnable tower, three of them shooting through slits constructed by vanished builders. Rodriguez, with rifle pointing almost straight downward through the overhang, fired fast into a knot of men at his front door. Thorne, peering through an upright embrasure, aimed his pistol carefully and loosed deliberate shots at dark forms which stood or knelt farther out. Flanagan, veteran of more than one defensive gun fight, held the rear of the square, watching the walls of the patio and saving cartridges. At rare intervals he discerned a black head rising above the barrier, as some crafty besieger climbed on the shoulders of another. Then he fired and the head dropped. Tomás stood in enforced idleness, gripping his gun, battle light again agleam in his eyes, awaiting the vital and lethal cartridges.

"*Aquí*," said Mariquita, rising from the hole.

The seemingly stoical Aztec sprang at her like a starved wolf at a fawn. He lifted her bodily, grabbed a box, ripped it

with hard nails, rammed bullets into his carbine, bounded to a slit overlooking the street. There he rapped out unerring shots at shapes seeking refuge from the fire of the white men.

SOON the firing stopped for lack of targets. Receding noises below faded into virtual silence. Over the wicked town sounded only the senseless barking of dogs.

"That'll be about all for now," drawled Flanagan, with feigned ennui. "Slow stuff, I'll say. Thought these Zapatistas were tough. They're nothin' but a few yeller dogs to kick away and send home with their tails draggin'. Now where do we go from here?"

A brief silence, while the others relaxed. Then Rodriguez answered, with outer indifference matching his own—

"Since there is nothing else to do, why not go down and see what we can find to eat?"

"*Hombre,* you're talkin' sense! I'm starved. And after that— The road's open now."

"Not for us," parried the Spaniard. "For men running and carrying no weights, yes, perhaps. But we are neither runners nor free of burdens. And there may be another way out. We shall see."

He paused, listened. Only the indefatigable yapping of curs was audible.

"Mariquita, go down," he bade, "and prepare whatever food you can find."

"Oh, father," rebelled the girl. "I have only just come up, and—and I want to stay here awhile and grow cool. I can not endure that room just now."

She looked at him appealingly. He glanced at the open hatch, whence the confined air of three hot days gushed skyward.

"I'm not hungry," lied Thorne. "Give me another clip of cartridges, Buck, and I'll stay up and hold the fort."

"Uh-huh." Flanagan's tone was dry. "This fort'll hold itself now. But here's your clip."

He went down the ladder. Tomás hesitated, looked at the Spaniard, followed. Rodriguez hesitated still longer, surveying his daughter and the quiet Easterner. Then, with quick decision, he set feet to the rungs and lowered himself.

Thorne stepped to one slit after another, seeing no moving form. Motionless shapes, human or equine, darkened the roadway at irregular intervals. But all living creatures were concealed in shadows. No more shots or shouts rang. Even the wearisome dog barks were dying out. Silence which seemed peaceful, though it was far otherwise, again was creeping over the Zapatista village.

He turned toward Mariquita, to find her a step or two behind him. Her rifle had been laid down beside the trapdoor. He looked at her, at the gun, at the waiting hatchway, and back at her. Then he resumed his walk around the small lookout. But he did not peer again from the gun crevices. Nor did she follow. Instead, she walked beside him.

CHAPTER XVIII

A TRUSTY TRAITOR

RODRIGUEZ and Flanagan sat at table. A pace away stood Tomás. None was eating, or thought of eating. The Spaniard was proffering something more important than a midnight lunch.

"Mr. Flanagan," he said, "you are a direct man. So am I—sometimes. This is one of those times. I shall not mince words.

"This is our position:

"We and our gold are safely lodged inside solid walls. As long as we maintain vigilance this fort of ours can not be captured. From the tower we can beat off any attack these people can make—as long as we have ammunition. I have a good supply of rifle and pistol cartridges which will fit your guns as well as my own. With economy, they will last a long time.

"We also have plenty of water; the

little fountain in the patio never fails. But we have not much food. When it is gone we shall be unable to get more. The woman who has been my housekeeper may bring some, but it will be only a bait to induce us to open a door. If the door opens, a bullet will come in. Or the food she brings will be poisoned. So we can rely only on what we now have, which will last only a day or two. When that is gone we starve.

"While we starve, this house will be watched day and night. There will probably be a few more attacks in force. Then our gentle friends will simply wait and watch, with occasional sniping, until they find us too weak to hold them off longer. By that time they will have made a battering ram. They will smash in the door and end us—except, perhaps, my daughter, whom certain men will wish to keep alive."

His lips contracted. Flanagan's face hardened in comprehension.

"But they will get none of us alive!" continued Rodriguez. "I shall take care of that.

"If worse comes to worst, we can escape with our lives—but not with our gold. There is a way out which is unknown to these people. I have examined this house thoroughly, and found things which they have not learned. The builder of this place not only constructed it for defense but provided a secret exit. It leads underground to a deep *barranca*—a gorge—some distance away. Once there was a mule path in that gorge, but for many years it has been blocked by rock slides caused by earthquakes. Now only a strong, active person can climb out of that *barranca;* and he can carry no burden. The stones are very steep and slippery. There are snakes and scorpions. It is a route to be used only as the last resort. But I intend to use it tonight—"

"Huh?" erupted Flanagan. "And leave the gold for these hyenas? Not me, *hombre!* I'm stickin' till I'm through needin' it or anything else!"

"Hear me out," frowned the Spaniard. "I intend to use that route to summon help. Without help we can never move our gold away from here. We shall have to pay something for it, but we are well able to pay for what we need."

He glanced at the pile of bulging sacks.

"Uh-huh," admitted the other, in milder tone. "Us millionaires can spend some pesos without strainin' ourselves. But what kind of help can you get?"

"Soldiers."

The Northerner's eyes widened, then contracted curiously.

"Hm! Ain't you takin' a big chance, mister?" he suggested.

"Perhaps." The gray gaze was candid. "I am wanted by the government. But I know I can fare no worse at the hands of Obregonistas than at those of Zapatistas. And my daughter—and you gentlemen—will not be outraged or assassinated by federal officers. The chance is worth taking. And, with your permission, I will take it."

A short silence ensued. Flanagan regarded the Spaniard with deeper respect than he had ever shown, or felt. Then his eyes lifted to the square opening beyond which sounded soft, regular footsteps.

"I think Mr. Thorne will agree with us," said Rodriguez. "You two are like the hand and the glove."

"Uh-huh. Yup, he'll agree to anything that'll help your girl," bluntly affirmed Buck. "And so will I—short of quittin' this gold. In that case I, personal, am stickin' with it to the finish. Now go ahead."

"Very well."

The political refugee looked up, listened to the unbroken tread; then turned to confront the patient Tomás. His tone remained low, but turned autocratic.

"Tomás," he asserted, in Spanish, "you are about to betray me."

Tomás stared. Then his eyes turned angry.

"No!" he growled.

"*Sí,*" contradicted the white. "Listen carefully.

"Your brother Pedro lies there, killed

by Zapatista snakes. You will avenge him by doing what I tell you.

"To the east lies the town of Acatala. To reach that town by the river road, the river itself, and the roads beyond, an ordinary man must travel at least five days. But Pedro once told me that he and you knew a way across the mountains by which you could reach the place in nine hours of fast walking. Did he speak truth?"

"*Sí.* It is an old path of our people."

"*Bien.* At Acatala are soldiers of the government. You will depart at once for that town. I shall show you a safe way to the *barranca* behind this place. You will take Pedro with you to that *barranca.* leave him there, and start immediately for your secret trail. You will travel that trail as fast as you can. Before noon you will reach the town.

"There you will tell the commander of the soldiers that you know where Felipe Rodriguez, the Serranista, can be found. You will say that a number of Zapatistas can be caught at the same place. You will not tell him where that place is. But you will offer to lead him and his men by a swift and secret way to that place if well paid. You will haggle with him over the reward. When you have reached an agreement on the price for your service you will bring him and his men here with all speed.

"When you are near this town you will tell the commander to split his force and come in from both ends of the town. You will go with him to the end nearest the river. There you will slip away from him and climb the dead tree at the east side of the road. Step out on the first broken branch and stand there. We shall be watching. After that you may do whatever you wish. *Comprende?*"

Slow understanding crept into the brown face. The brown eyes slid to the dead man. The brown lids narrowed with determination.

"When you return," added the Spaniard, "you shall have both your own share and Pedro's share of the enchanted treasure. If you handle the matter cleverly you shall have still more. But if you do not start *pronto* and travel fast, your reward will be one hard bullet."

The two looked at each other inflexibly. With unexpected spirit the Aztec retorted:

"Use that bullet on a Zapatista. How do I depart?"

"I shall show you." The white man arose; then paused, glancing skyward. The steps above had stopped.

Flanagan lifted himself from his chair, walked to the ladder, climbed. Halfway up, he raucously coughed. Farther up he stopped, head and shoulders out, body blocking the small square.

"Lovely evenin'," he remarked, gazing carefully at the stars. "If you folks don't need all the scenery I might come up."

"Come ahead," Thorne invited, though without cordiality.

"All right, after I get my wind. I've ate so much this climbin' is heavy work."

A glance showed him that Mariquita and Thorne were standing close together, backs to the wall, faces slightly resentful of his intrusion. Another, beneath his armpit, revealed more. In the stone flagged floor below him a square black opening had appeared. Into that cavern Tomás was descending by a crude stairway, carrying his rifle and Thorne's flashlight. Rodriguez was dragging to the opening the body of Pedro.

His head rose again. For several minutes he held his pose, bantering the pair above. Then he stole another look downward. The black square was gone. So were the Indians. Rodriguez sat again at the table, lighting a cigar at the lone candle.

"Guess I've got up enough strength to come the rest of the way," he announced, resuming motion. "You can go down now. Take a nap, or anything else you can find. Oh, say, Thorne, give me your gun and any loose shells you've got. They might come in handy."

He walked toward his partner, confident, careless. Mariquita, with a touch of reluctance, moved to the hatch and set foot on the ladder. Thorne, silent, drew

his pistol and extended it, a question in his eyes. Flanagan said nothing until the girl's head had sunk below the tower floor. Then he murmured:

"Don't overeat. There ain't much. And don't ask questions about where the Indians went. They're both gone. Tell the girl good night and tear off some sleep. You're liable to need it before we get clear. So long."

"What's the dope?" demanded Thorne.

"I'll tell you when you come up again, and not before. And that will be in two hours. Now hit the hay and sleep hard."

He turned away with finality. Thorne shrugged, went down the ladder. When he had vanished, Flanagan made the round of the slits, seeing nothing new. Then, pausing at the street side, he removed his hat, hoisted it slowly on the end of Mariquita's forgotten rifle, moved it slowly at the edge of the parapet as if he were standing on something and peering about.

A sudden blow knocked the faded headgear back and down. In the seemingly somnolent night a gunshot roared.

"Uh-huh," the new sentry muttered. "The old boy knows his stuff. And these gorillas can shoot. Well, Tomás, old-timer, it's up to you."

He walked to the other side and stood peering toward the gloomy heights beyond the town, within whose shadows an unseen Indian might now be emerging into an unwatched gorge.

CHAPTER XIX

SIEGE

TWO HOURS before dawn the moon set. A quarter hour afterward, in dense darkness, a new attack developed.

Unlike the first confused rush, this approach was made with a definite plan. Short scaling ladders, noiselessly conveyed to the wall of the patio, gave stealthily moving men ascent to the top, whence, perhaps, they meant to climb to the roof and occupy the seemingly empty tower. One of the ladders, however, bumped slightly against the stones. Another creaked under a climbing weight.

Thorne, alone in the tower, flashed Flanagan's spotlight through a rearward slit. Astonished faces gaped into the dazzling white beam. An instant later red flashes leaped at them. Fast shots roared. Two faces jerked back as if hit by hammers and were gone. Others ducked.

With the cessation of the reports, heads sprang up again, and bodies after them. The guard, however, promptly reopened fire with a new clip. Flanagan and Rodriguez, bearing rifles, came up the ladder at top speed. They went into action at once. Within ten seconds the wall was swept clean. Thereafter it remained vacant.

The defenders sprang to the other side, flashed the light downward. A small group at the front door scattered at once. Two of them ran close together, carrying something heavy.

"A keg of powder! The devils!" gritted Rodriguez. He shot twice after the fleeing forms. One staggered, voiced a yell of pain, but kept his feet. The pair faded into darkness.

Other yells broke out, yells of anger and chagrin. Bullets pounded the wall. A discord of vituperative oaths and obscene threats befouled the night. Then silence returned.

"Nice boys, ain't they!" commented Flanagan. "I'm beginnin' to think they might use us rough if they got hold of us. But they're about through for tonight. That flashlight sure cramped their style."

His prediction proved correct. From that time until well after daybreak nobody approached the stronghold. Then came a woman.

She walked fearlessly across the plaza, bearing on her head a huge wooden platter heaped with food. Straight to the door she trudged. There she knocked and called:

"Señor! Open, if you please! It is your faithful Concha, with the breakfast."

Rodriguez, on watch above her head, looked hungrily down at the profusion of

fresh victuals. But his voice, answering, was derisive—

"My faithful Concha, first let me see *you* eat well of that breakfast."

She started, surprised by the reply above her. But her excuse was glib.

"I have eaten, señor. I could not swallow another mouthful."

"Neither can we swallow a mouthful of that stuff. I can not even swallow your lie. Never before have you eaten before serving us, Concha. Take your fodder back home and feed it to the poisoners who sent you! *Vaya!*"

She stood rigid.

"Get out!" he repeated, harshly. "And stay away!"

With that he clicked the hammer of his rifle.

At that small but menacing sound she wheeled and departed at a trot. Several yards away, suddenly mastered by anger, she confirmed his suspicions. She threw tray and food to the dirt, spun about, shrieked a vile epithet. Then she ran for cover.

As she fled, some other woman laughed shrilly, maliciously; some woman who disliked the erstwhile insolent Concha and rejoiced at her discomfiture. Her mirth redoubled when, from the hovel in which Concha lived, sounded screams and impacts of vicious blows. Plainly the treacherous servant was paying the penalty of failure and of unreasoning temper.

Rodriguez, too, laughed, loudly, savagely, mocking his baffled foes with ridicule worse than words. In response a few bullets flattened against the stones. Then peace came again. This time it lasted long.

With the exception of occasional sniping shots, in fact, it lasted all day and all the following night. Ixtlatixtla had exhausted its expedients and, as Rodriguez had predicted, settled down to watchful waiting. Through the woman Concha, it knew that food in the citadel was meager. With plenty of provender of its own, and years of time ahead, it could well afford to take its ease. After posting riflemen to watch the treasure house it attended to the satisfaction of its habitual appetites, normal, abnormal, or subnormal.

INSIDE the fortress, time dragged. At appointed hours one or another of the men climbed the ladder to relieve the lone sentinel. At meal times they ate of such food as Mariquita could find, each denying himself in order to leave more for the others. They drank plentifully of the cool water which she brought from the fountain while one man protected her from overhead and another at the opened rear door. They stored more water within doors, filling every available receptacle. And, at the suggestion of Rodriguez, they hid almost all their gold.

Only one bag of the treasure was left in sight. The rest went down the hole in the floor and into the tunnel which reached to the gorge.

"If Tomás does not come back," said the Spaniard, "we shall go out to the *barranca*, and secure the end of this tunnel so well that not even he could enter it, or even find it. If he does, I have use for this one sack. By the way, Mr. Flanagan, do you wish to take the light and explore this hole?"

"Nope. I'm takin' your word for everything now, Rodriguez."

"*Muy bien*," smiled the other. And the work went on to completion.

Aside from this task, the day crept past in monotonous routine. The men watched, napped, smoked, talked in turn with one another and with Mariquita, who, until nightfall, seemed tireless. The two subjects of conversation tacitly taboo in her presence were their present situtation and the disappearance of the Indians. Concerning the latter Rodriguez curtly explained—

"I have sent Tomás on an errand."

And, after a straight look at him and another at the spot where Pedro had lain, she refrained from questions.

Night came, clear and calm. For a little time Mariquita walked the tower roof with Thorne; then went below, and so to

bed. Throughout the night the sentinels heard no ominous sounds, except, after moonset, a barely audible approach of feet toward street door and rear wall. The flashlight disclosed no attacking shapes. The wary mestizos were only lying in wait for any one who might seek to leave the fortress by dark.

Another dawn dispelled gloom. Again Rodriguez met it. Swiftly the pall thinned. High light extinguished stars. The road became dimly visible, then distinct. In it was nothing but the skeletons of burros devoured by buzzards during the day gone by. He stepped to an opening commanding the river road and stood there eagerly watching a dead tree. As sunlight swept the heavens and hit the mountain tops, that tree showed life.

On the first stubby branch appeared a human form. It stepped out from the trunk, stood black against the bright sky. There it remained motionless.

"Hah!" exulted the Spaniard.

With one stride, he fired his rifle straight down into the living room. The thunderous report shocked every sleeper below into leaping wakefulness.

Turning, he shot repeatedly into the sky. The rapid reports reverberated among the houses and the surrounding heights. If any man in the town had slept after first cockcrow and burro bray, he slept no longer.

Ixtlatixtla, fully aroused, sprang to its guns.

CHAPTER XX

BULLET AND BAYONET

OVER the tower of the stronghold of Rodriguez waved a white rag, flung wide by the morning breeze, brightly illuminated by fast rising sun. Tied to the muzzle of a lifted rifle, it swung back and forth along the upper edge; a target not worth shooting at, yet a magnet to every Zapatista eye.

Inside that tower stood four people in various stages of disarray: Rodriguez in shirt and trousers and sandals, Thorne and Flanagan minus shirts, Mariquita in loose nightgown; all clutching weapons. The rifle of the Spaniard, however, pointed skyward and flourished the rag. The others hung aimless, while their holders stared in blank amazement at the man who seemed about to surrender their citadel.

Outside, armed men ran from every quarter to group before the stone house. The defenders who had been so defiant and deadly were already starved into talking terms! *Muy bien!*

With the celerity of buzzards swooping to a ghoulish feast they converged in the tiny square. Avaricious eyes gloated on the oscillating sign of lost courage. Teeth gleamed in greasy visages. An arrogant voice called:

"Ho, Rodriguez! *Tiene hambre?* Are you hungry?"

"No!" came hard denial. The flag stopped. "I only wish to talk to you."

Grins widened. Malicious snickers hissed. The spokesman assumed hypocritical amiability.

"*Sí?* We are glad to speak to you again, señor." His teeth showed mockingly at each word, but his voice took on an injured tone as he added, "Since you came back by night and shot men without provocation we have thought you to be our enemy. But we are willing to be reasonable. *Sí*, we should like to be your friends again. What do you wish?"

Over his shoulder the Spaniard loudly whispered:

"Look to the south! Do you see any one there?"

Through the narrow embrasure he retorted:

"Those men attacked us! Could you expect us to stand still and be shot? We defended ourselves. And we still do, until we are assured of decent treatment!"

From a southern slit came the excited voice of Thorne, low but vibrant:

"Yes! Men are coming, men wearing caps— Soldiers!"

From the northern side of the small square chimed Flanagan:

"Yeah, and there's some more comin' hotfoot from the other end! Oh baby! We're in for a good show!"

"*Qué?* Decent treatment?" echoed the grinning mestizo below. "You surprise me! When have you not been treated with decency and respect in this town? Be sure, señor, you will always be given the treatment you deserve—"

Crash! Crrrrrack!

Rifles volleyed. Rolling fire instantly followed.

In the brief time while the Spaniard herded his enemies and held their attention, small but efficient forces of men in uniform had double-timed from both ends of the short town. While frowzy mestizas in hut doors stood agape, too astounded to scream warnings to their mates gathered in the square, the charging platoons passed and went into action. Swerving at the plaza, they immediately opened fire, that deadly cross-fire which, hitting obliquely from two directions at once, mows down bunched victims with appalling surety.

Zapatistas fell like stalks before the scythe of a reaper. But others, as yet untouched, jerked up guns and retaliated with fast, straight fire.

"*Viva Zapata!*" screamed a man wounded but unconquered.

A ferocious chorus responded. The blunt roar of the .44's increased, though two-thirds of the outlaws were down. The sharper bite of the government .30's lost its victorious edge. Uniformed shapes sprawled, writhed, lay still. Though caught by surprise and now far outnumbered, the merciless veterans of an abortive war fought back with a fury inspired by desperation and memory of a dead leader.

Emiliano Zapata and a bare score of his men, trapped in the hills through treachery, had slain ten times their number before they were wiped out. Zapata himself had fought on after being struck by a dozen bullets. And, though these Ixtlatixtlans were dregs of his army, who had deserted him in time of need, they remembered. Trapped in their turn, they turned berserk at sound of that shout.

"*Viva Zapata!*" bellowed those still standing. And, guns shot out, they plunged like mad bulls at the hated federals.

SOME had knives, some only empty rifles or revolvers. But they came with the fury of madness. And the soldiers rushed to meet them. Their bayonets had been fixed before they entered the town. Now, as the mad bulls charged, they came in with the celerity and certitude of trained *matadores.*

Steel thrust. Butts bludgeoned. Shots spat. Grappling forms fell. Then uniformed figures walked quickly among wounded villagers, jabbing with ruthless bayonets. When they ceased, no Zapatista remained alive.

Two officers, gripping empty pistols and crimsoned swords, met and conferred briefly. Their eyes swept over the still shapes of the vanquished, the dead or wounded soldiers, the diminished and disordered platoons capable of further fighting, and then fixed on the closed fortress. From the tower the white flag had vanished at the first crash of gunfire. Inside, the defenders stood seeing all, but unseen. The stone pile looked lifeless. But the officers knew it was not untenanted.

After a crisp exchange of sentences the younger turned to his men and barked curt orders. The elder slipped a new clip into his pistol, then strode fearless to the door. There he rapped sharply with the hilt of his sword.

"Felipe Rodriguez! Open!" he commanded.

"*Buenos dias, capitán!*" easily responded Rodriguez. "Welcome to Ixtlatixtla!"

The officer started slightly, jerked his hawk-like face upward, instinctively backed a step; then caught himself and stood rigidly alert, pistol half raised but not aimed.

"I shall be pleased to admit you to my poor house and talk with you," continued the master, "but I must insist that

you enter alone, and that your men hold their distance while we confer."

"I will do nothing of the kind!" came tart refusal. "You will obey my order. I am in control here. I have annihilated your men."

"*My* men? Ho-ho-ho! You are much mistaken, sir! My men are here with me, and very good fighters they are. Those Zapatistas were our enemies, and we have been destroying them, as we can destroy any others who try to capture us. Gaze a moment at my door, if you doubt my statements."

The captain did so. Already he had noted the bullet marks on the tough wood. Now he regarded them more attentively; also the powder scorch around the keyhole, and certain recent stains on sill and step. It was quite obvious that fierce assaults had resulted only in disaster to the assailants, and that his own forces, though better trained and led, were likely to be little more successful.

"You have my word of honor," added the voice overhead, "that you will meet with no treachery inside these walls. You have nothing to lose, and, perhaps, much to gain by accepting my invitation. If you still decline to enter, I shall be reluctantly compelled to bid you *adios*—and to do what I can to speed your men on their way elsewhere."

"Humph!" snorted the commander. But his tone was less harsh. The suggestion of gain had not fallen on a deaf ear. After a slight pause he replied:

"*Bien.* I have heard that Felipe Rodriguez was a gentleman."

"Was, and is," interjected the exile.

"And I will enter and talk with you for exactly fifteen minutes."

"That is much better, Capitán. Give us five minutes for dressing. We arose hurriedly, and are not quite presentable."

Mariquita started, glanced down at her decidedly informal garment, and, with a burning blush, fled through the trap. Thorne and Flanagan, suddenly aware of their unclad torsos, turned somewhat pink, but stood their ground. Rodriguez laughed in high good humor.

"Let us all go down, sirs," he prompted. "No guard is needed here for the time."

"Sure about that?" doubted Flanagan.

Answer came from below in the voice of the captain, calling:

"Lieutenant, station a sentry ten yards from this door. Hold the other men where they are. If I do not come out fifteen minutes after I enter this house, take proper action."

"Fair enough," decreed Thorne. "Come on, Buck."

They went.

CHAPTER XXI

TEMPTATION

AT THE table in the shadowy living room sat four men. Above them the open trap let in light. Elsewhere was no opening to the day. The door through which the captain had entered was barred.

The captain sat erect, formal, watchful. His weapons were in their sheaths, his hands on his thighs, lying loose but ready. On the table before him lay his square wrist watch, steadily ticking off seconds.

"Fifteen minutes go quickly, Capitán," reminded Rodriguez. "So let us be brief.

"Last fall General Serrano made the mistake of believing he could become president, in opposition to General Obregón. I made the same error. Political mistakes are dangerous. Serrano is dead. So are his principal backers, except one Felipe Rodriguez, who escaped into voluntary exile.

"So far as General Obregón is concerned, the flight of Rodriguez is as good as his death. If Rodriguez is never heard of again, Obregón is satisfied. Or, even if it is learned that Rodriguez went to some other country, he will be content. Now that the Serranista movement is crushed, he cares nothing about Rodriguez or the others who were behind it. He will be the next president. We who opposed him and failed are forgotten.

"So much for me. Now let us consider you. Suppose you capture me and turn me over to the government—the Calles government which will soon be the Obregón government. What is your reward? A few words of empty praise from some higher officer, who then will take to himself whatever credit may be had. You, a captain at the outlying town of Acatala, have not the ear of any general in Mexico City. So you get a little warm wind, perhaps a pat on the back, and nothing more. Is it not true?"

The captain kept his mouth closed. But his sharp eyes glimmered. The exile smiled.

"If that were the best reward you could obtain for coming here, it would be worth collecting, of course," smoothly continued Rodriguez. "But it happens that there is something much more valuable, which I, in my exile, have found. Or, rather, I have helped these gentlemen, who are archæologists, to find. Together we have unearthed a treasure which has long been hidden. It is theirs and mine. Here is a sample of it."

He slid across the table one of the clean gold pieces from the Enchanted Hill. The captain's eyes fastened on it.

"And over there is a whole bag of pieces exactly like it," the tempter went on. "The entire bag could be yours, Capitán."

The hawk eyes shot to the taut sack. They grew wider, glowed with sudden fire. The corded throat moved in an involuntary swallow.

"It could be yours if we were given safe conduct down the river to the west coast and on board a steamer for the North. After that steamer sailed, Felipe Rodriguez would be gone forever from Mexico. It would not be necessary for Mexico City ever to hear how he went, or where, or when. Your report could be that you came here to exterminate a gang of Zapatista bandits and then pursued others down the river. I am sure that a man of your military education knows how to make out a report."

The little watch ticked off ten seconds before the officer relinquished his gaze at the bag, and five more before he broke his silence.

"As you say, the Serrano matter is nearly forgotten," he admitted. "But you have much more of this gold, of course."

"I myself have no more," coolly falsified the Spaniard. "There is more, but it all belongs to these Americans who discovered it. They wish to carry their shares to the coast. I wish to carry myself and my daughter to the same place. As scientific gentlemen, they are entitled to full protection from government troops. I might add, by the way, that the American Government knows where they are, and that any accident to them or their possessions might prove quite embarrassing to those responsible for that accident. As for myself—my safety and that of my daughter are worth more than that bag."

The captain's glance passed over the faces of the aliens, and a faint smile twitched the corners of his mouth. To him, as to the police of the capital, Flanagan looked more like a gunman than like a scientist. Moreover, like many other Mexican fighters, he had held no great respect for the power of the American Government. But he knew that recently the relations between his country and the United States had become much more amicable than they had been for nearly two decades. He knew that ex-President Obregón, despite political denunciations of America in his previous term of office, was at heart friendly toward the Northern republic. He knew that, having eliminated all other presidential aspirants, Obregón would inevitably be re-elected. Neither he nor any one else present could foresee that, a few days after the re-election, the forceful veteran of many a battle would fall victim to the concealed weapon of a fanatical assassin.

However, clairvoyance was not essential to the formation of his decision. His eyes reverted to the sack of gold . . .

"AND THERE," swiftly pressed the ex-conspirator Rodriguez, "is the entire proposal. On the one hand, you hold Ixtlatixtla, which is not worth holding. On the other, we hold this little fort, which you can not capture until we choose to abandon it. When we do choose to do so, we have ways of leaving it which you do not know and can not discover. When we leave, our treasure vanishes with us. When your men finally break in they will find only a worthless shell. And by that time there will be very few left to break in. And you will not be one of them!"

A note of iron suddenly clanged in his hitherto velvety tone. Then it faded as quickly as it had sounded.

"Unless, of course, you hide somewhere and let your men take the bullets, which I can not believe of you," added Rodriguez. "But why discuss the matter further? Time grows short. And we understand each other, do we not?"

The officer glanced at his watch.

"Three minutes are left," he said. "I—ah—think there is much sense in your statements, señor. No doubt the government would be glad to have you leave the country. And it is my duty, of course, to give scientific gentlemen full protection against bad characters in this region. So let us be going."

The two looked each other straight in the face. Rodriguez nodded, then turned to the American pair.

"Gentlemen, you have heard," he said. "Are we all in agreement?"

"I'm satisfied," acquiesced Thorne.

"Suits me," coincided Flanagan. "Only you might tell this bird I'm sort of nervous and timid, and my hands are jumpy, and if I should get scared about the way him and his men act anywheres between here and the coast—he won't be comin' back."

"That had better be left unsaid. It is quite well understood. We are agreed, then? Good!"

He arose. The captain promptly stood and picked up his watch. Only forty seconds remained before his men would attack.

Thorne walked to the barred door, carelessly knocking a shoe against the treasure bag as he passed it. A faint metallic sound answered. The captain's eyes gleamed again.

"I am glad that you accepted my invitation to come in out of the sun, Capitán," remarked Rodriguez.

"So am I," grinned the officer.

Then the door opened and he strode out.

CHAPTER XXII

MOONLIGHT

FULL moon rolled up from the Gulf of Mexico, spread brilliance over the mysterious land south of the Rio Grande, flung its light over the mighty mountains and far out upon the vast Pacific Ocean.

The snowy peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl shone cold and clear in that white radiance, looking down with changeless austerity on the high vale of Anáhuac and its proud capital city. The wide metropolis on the ancient lake bed twinkled with myriad lights, among which its white or brown inhabitants moved in search of gaiety or gain. Farther out, smaller towns showed less light and life. And in the rugged lands away at the west and the south, more than one tree shadowed hamlet remained dark.

The village of Ixtlatixtla, pocketed among half known hills, had not even the feeble flame of a candle to brighten the gloom within its houses. Nobody now was there to need a candle. In the past few days, since the departure of the archæologists and their burro train and federal escort, the manless survivors of their scientific visit had migrated to another settlement where might be found new men. So the abandoned lair of Zapatistas was as dead as that uncanny *cerro*, a few leagues off, which had brought about its desertion—the legendary Enchanted Hill.

At the end of the Ixtlatixtla road ran the river, a twisty highway of gleaming silver, reaching with rapid flow to the sea. At its end lay a harbor and a town. In the town were travel worn soldiers who had come down from the cool heights off at the east, and who now, with military promptitude, were capturing impressionable hearts. They had free rein, for their lieutenant was engaged in similar conquest, and their captain had disappeared.

That commander now was concealed within the walls of a closed house and engaged in undignified but absorbing toil. In a large kettle hung over a steady fire he was boiling black coins. Near him lay a bulky sack, open at one end, from which extended the handle of a small shovel. Although perspiration oozed from his whole body and dripped from his nose, he seemed well content to work all night, if necessary, at his menial job. He had become an alchemist, transmuting dull metal into clean gold.

Leagues away at the northward, drawing farther away at every thrust of her engines, a steamship plowed the round backed surges. At the starboard rail two figures stood very close together, gazing absently at the ragged black outline of mountains. Wide gray eyes, steady blue eyes, reflected the radiance of the heavens and glowed with the flame of dreams. An aristocratic white hand and a larger, broader one rested together on the curved wood, fingers intertwined.

Other passengers walked behind them, some nudging one another, but all going their way without pause or remark. Then came two men strolling shoulder to shoulder, breathing deep of the free air of the sea, giving Mexico only an occasional glance. As they drew near, the bulky one chuckled and jolted the other in the ribs with unconsciously forceful elbow. The older man scowled slightly, then looked at the dreaming pair and smiled. He walked onward, saying nothing. Then he paused, as his abrupt companion swerved and stopped.

"Say, Thorne," intruded the latter, in a subdued tone audible for fifty feet, "I just learnt somethin' important. The capt'n of a ship at sea can marry passengers that want it. It's quite a long ways from here to Frisco, and— Well, I've told you."

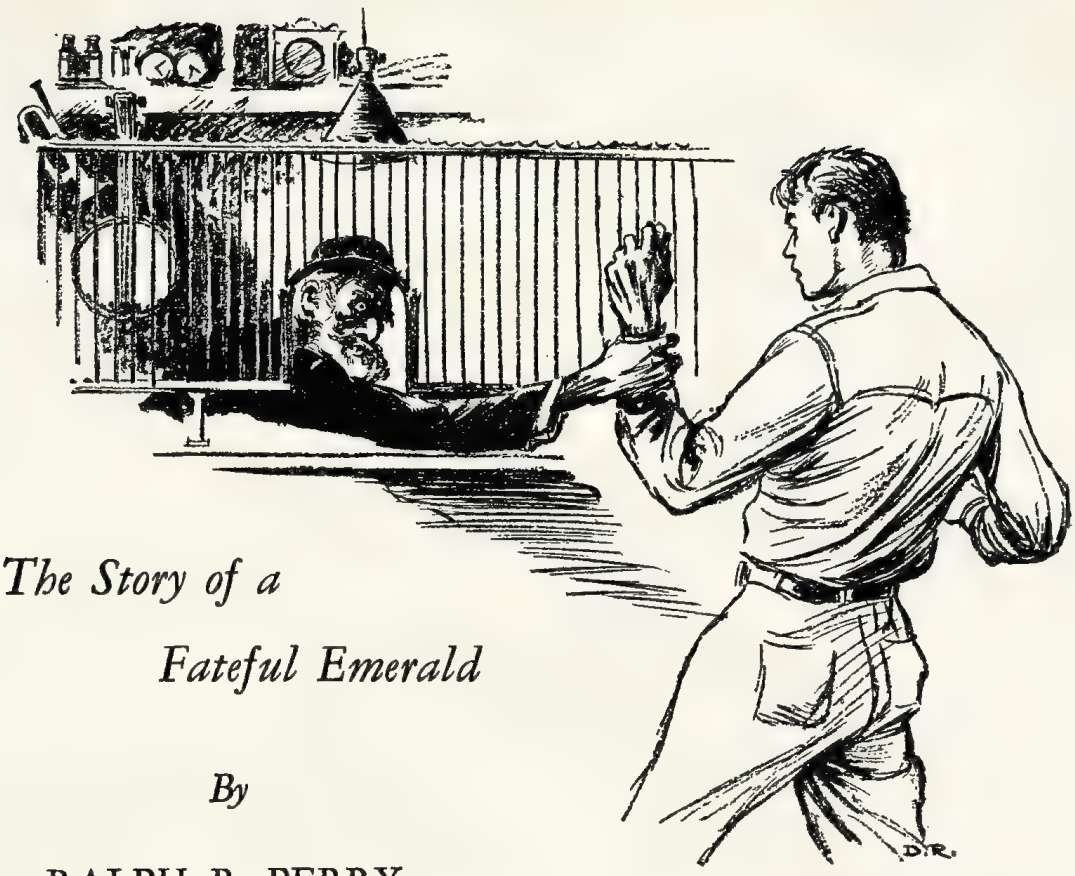
"Say, Buck," retorted the man at the rail, distinctly annoyed, "I knew that a long time ago. I don't need any help. And if you don't mind your own business I'll get an armadillo somewhere and ram it down your throat, raw, tail first!"

"Migawd!" Flanagan backed off. "You guys from down in Maine sure can get tough when you feel like it. I ate about a million dillies on my way South, and I'm off 'em for life. And their tails are long as a bayonet. Come on, Rodriguez, this ain't the place for us right now."

"I could have told you that," mildly reproved the Spaniard.

He resumed his promenade. Flanagan followed in some haste. But, as he went, he left behind him a satiric snicker.

Mariquita laughed suddenly, irrepressibly. Then, sobering, she searched the blue eyes which came back to hers. They smiled, and the gray ones responded. The hands met again, the faces turned once more to the magic moon. And, as the ship lunged on into the North, they said nothing. No words were needed. The sea and the sky and the new life beyond the horizon were enough.



The Story of a

Fateful Emerald

By

RALPH R. PERRY

A CURSE PASSES

"EIGHTEEN days they drifted, then they died," said Olaf. "Come, look—they haf kep' the tally on the gunwale."

The Swede stood in the bow of a fishing sloop. A boat hook was gripped against his chest. He stared, with eyes that were round and blue in his sunburned face, at the lifeboat which had been reached first by Death.

On the rail of the boat were eighteen knife cuts. Not grouped in fives—as fish or gear are tallied—but in sevens, as despairing seamen count the days of their torture. Whence the lifeboat had come, how many souls she had carried, Olaf could not determine. He was an uneducated, simple man. The name on the lifeboat's stern was meaningless to him; he could gather only the fact that she was of Russian registry. But of the fate which had overtaken the crew there were abundant signs for a seaman's eye.

A hardtack tin lay in the bottom of the boat, empty. More significant, a water cask with the bung out rolled gently to and fro as the boat lifted to the gentle swell of the Gulf of Mexico. Clothing covered the bottom boards in sodden heaps where men had lain and groaned for water. A woman's garter, broken and watersoaked, hinted that not all the occupants had been men.

In the prow a broken oar had been

lashed upright. A bit of rag, stirring in the breeze, still called mutely for rescue—an appeal that was awful now that hunger and thirst, sun and madness had made it mockery.

Far away Olaf had seen that rag waving. Da Costa, the skipper of the sloop, had brought his vessel alongside, crouching over the wheel with his lean yellow face astir with the hope of reward from rescued passengers. Perrault, the black browed Creole mate, had gone on gutting fish with sweeps of an eight-inch knife during that slow approach. Jaun, the skipper's fat eighteen year old nephew, had busied himself cooking shrimps and rice.

But Olaf had gone at once to the bow with his boat hook. Again and again during that slow approach over the sunlit water, tinged yellow with mud, carried seaward by the Mississippi River, he had hailed the lifeboat. Of the four, Olaf alone had been a deep water sailor. The rest were fishermen who worked out of New Orleans. He alone knew the terror of abandoning a sinking ship, the despair of sitting day after day in a crowded boat, scanning the horizon for a sail, for smoke, and seeing—nothing.

"It is hard to die so," he said huskily when the three joined him.

Perrault shrugged and wiped a bloody knife on his trouser leg. Jaun sneered with the superiority of a youth who has been to school; the skipper examined the boat—though only to make sure the planking was sound.

"We can sell her for twenty dollars to the shipyard," he gloated. "Jump in, Olaf, and pitch out that stuff."

"It is not goot luck," the Swede muttered, but he obeyed.

From the lifeboat he passed an armful of sodden garments to Perrault, who searched the pockets and, finding nothing, tossed the clothing overboard.

"The clothes might show who they were," Olaf objected.

"Ain't I lookin'?" growled Perrault.

"Find out who they were and they'd own the boat," said Da Costa cunningly. "Git busy!"

Olaf, however, left the clothing where it was. In the stern a handkerchief was tied around a thwart. He removed it, held it up so that all could see that something was knotted inside the sea bleached linen, and climbed out on to the sloop's deck.

"Papers we must save," he declared with the utmost seriousness. "I can feel a paper. And something small and hard—like a nut."

The three fishermen crouched beside him, intent and covetous while the Swede's stiff fingers fumbled with the knots.

The paper came out of the handkerchief first. Olaf spread it on the deck in the sun. The two Da Costas bent above it. Perrault and Olaf, unable to read, drew back.

"English," grunted the skipper. "Read it then, Jaun." The cook whispered:

> "I knew it was cursed when I stole it. May it kill you as cruelly as thirst kills me.
>
> —SERGE MOSKOWITZ."

From the handkerchief a gem as large as the end of a man's thumb slipped through Olaf's fingers, struck the deck and rolled like a lump of green, scintillant flame upon the curse Serge had written.

Da Costa snatched the emerald and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Mine!" he snarled, reaching for the revolver in his pocket.

With his knife Perrault lunged across the deck. The blade sank to the hilt in Da Costa's side. A convulsive jerk stiffened every muscle in the skipper's lean body. A nickel plated .32 caliber revolver dropped from his pocket. Jaun snatched the weapon and sprang back, barely avoiding Perrault's fist.

With animal grunts the Creole stabbed Da Costa in the chest, tore the emerald from the skipper's pocket and rose, the dripping knife held swordwise.

Jaun's black eyes glittered with hate and greed; he fired, again and again, so close to the mate that the leaping flashes touched his shirt.

Perrault was hit, for he staggered, but

the bullets were far too light to stop his rush. He charged the revolver. Howling with terror, Jaun fled toward the stern with the big man at his heels. In the cockpit the mate caught the boy, flung him to the deck, and buried the knife between his shoulder blades.

WHEN Perrault came to his feet he held the revolver in his right hand. Still without a word, he started toward Olaf, who remained squatted, staring and spellbound, at the spot where the emerald had slipped through his fingers. The big Creole's face was chalk white. He wavered as he walked; a spreading stain of blood grew in four different patches on his shirt where the bullets had struck.

He pointed the revolver straight at Olaf's head and pulled the trigger. There was only a click. Every cartridge had been exploded. Perrault dropped the weapon, shifted his knife back to his right hand and resumed his slow, wavering advance.

Step by step the Swede retreated. The snap of the revolver had broken the spell which had held him motionless. Perrault's eyes were glazing. His knees sagged, his will could not force his muscles to a swifter pace, yet he was able to corner Olaf in the narrow bow. With the knife at his breast, the Swede remembered the lifeboat, leaped into it. The impetus of his jump pushed the boat away from the sloop. With blue water widening between Perrault and himself he was safe.

Yet he could not bring himself to row away, though there were oars in the boat. Instead he allowed the lifeboat to drift while he watched Perrault stagger weakly toward the stern. The mate was dying. He was barely able to reach the mast. He leaned there, coughing and wiping the blood from his lips until his strength did not suffice to lift a hand. The knife slipped from his fingers. He put his hand into his pocket, and Olaf saw the emerald flash in the sunlight.

Then Perrault's head dropped. He wilted to the deck and lay still. In the utter silence the sound of the emerald, rolling across the blood stained planks, came over the calm sea.

How Olaf returned to the sloop he did not remember. His next conscious impression was of a glittering green eye that lay just in front of his fingers. It seemed to wink at him banefully. He seized the gem, pocketed it, shuddering, and on the instant was gripped with fear such as he had never known.

Da Costa's body was at his elbow. The skipper's eyes were not shut. They seemed to Olaf black pools of hate which cursed him. Stay on the sloop he could not. He sprang back into the lifeboat, seized the oars, and rowed furiously toward the low green shoreline of Louisiana, five miles away.

Though the familiar labor and the familiar sound of creaking oarlocks restored Olaf to sanity by the time the lifeboat's keel grated on the beach, coherent thought only revealed what appalling errors of judgment he had made. He had not done one thing to obliterate the evidence of murder. He would be accused, arrested, hanged—he who had a fortune in his pocket that would maintain him, comfortable and idle, all the rest of his life back in Sweden.

What he should have done was to tumble the bodies overboard. No, they would float after nine days. He should have set the sloop's sails, lashed her wheel, and started her out to sea. Those who saw her pass would think that Da Costa was out to try his luck on distant fishing grounds. He should have burned the note.

But now it was too late to carry out the plan. A flat calm had fallen. The sloop would only drift. To row back in the lifeboat and obtain the paper now would never do. Olaf might be seen; men might wonder what he was doing in the lifeboat. His best chance was to let the boat drift out to sea, to go swiftly to New Orleans, thence to Minneapolis, and disappear.

He shoved the boat into the water, and the tide, which was rising, floated it back toward him. Sweat broke out on Olaf's

forehead. Were wind and sea in league against the possessor of the emerald? It might be so. Serge Moskowitz had escaped violence. The gem had been safe in his pocket when wind and sea slew him, slowly, cruelly.

"It is cursed—*ja*," Olaf muttered.

He thought of throwing the gem away, but he could not. Instead he strode away from the beach. He would hunt a town, a railroad. Speed—that was the thing. There was enough silver in his pocket to buy a ticket to New Orleans. There he would pawn the emerald. With plenty of money he could flee fast and far.

"YOU DONE missed de train, boss," said the negro sleepily. "Won' be no mo' train fo' a long spell."

The field hand whom Olaf had awakened yawned, closed his eyes, and resumed his nap in the shade of the tiny station.

The sailor would have given much to follow his example. Hours of walking had brought him to a village half buried in the lush vegetation of the lower Delta. A station, a one track railroad, two houses, and for the rest, heat and an oppressive sultriness that gripped Olaf by the throat.

His impatience would not let him rest. He paced the station platform, and after a time a white man emerged from a house and sauntered toward him. There is something wrong when a bareheaded man paces feverishly up and down in the sunshine of a Louisiana summer. The stranger wore a nickel plated star on his suspender strap, but the fear that clutched Olaf had little basis in fact. The village constable could not read a tortured mind. He had left his cool veranda as much to play the Good Samaritan as to investigate a stranger who acted queerly.

"What's wrong, suh?" he inquired.

"Nothing . . ." Olaf realized such an answer would not serve. "I'm sick," he gulped. "Fever. Want to get to a doctor."

"Sho' look the sickest white man ever I seed," said the constable sympathetically. "Yo' face is mottled red and white like a cow's hide. Ain't no doctor hereabouts, but we have quinine. You'll take some?"

Olaf nodded.

"You don't shake like the ague," commented the constable thoughtfully. "Been drinking, suh? Lookin' at you close, I'd allow you had the horrors. I mind a man like you. Arrested him just as he was fleein' a double murder, suh."

"Murder?" Olaf gasped.

"Two murders, suh," said the constable, searching the Swede's startled countenance with a glance suddenly suspicious. "Come to my house and I'll tell you. Won't be long till train time. You ain't got to wait but an hour."

Despite Olaf's protests he was led across the road, given a dose of quinine which made his head ring, and settled in a cane chair. The emerald bulged his trouser pocket. Swiftly he pushed it out of sight.

"If it's fever you got, you'll be better soon," drawled the constable. "If not—well, as I was tellin' you, that murderer come runnin' down the road, his face patchy, and breathin' in shallow jerks. I stopped him, thinking he'd been drinking 'shine or had a touch of sun. He fought me, so I locked him up. Got a lot of credit for the arrest, later, but liquor an' fever was really all I thought of—that time. Fever and the horrors and guilt, when they're powerful bad, make a man look the same, don't you reckon?"

Olaf made a noise in his throat which the constable took for assent.

"He'd been chopping wood with two pardners. There was a lot of money in his pocket, and when the doctor come he couldn't find nothing wrong," the constable resumed. "So I went to his cabin. It was burned down, suh, but his pardners were in the ashes. They was burned, suh. But we knowed them by their pocket knives and such like trash. They were lying on an ax, and the head of one was split. The other had been struck in the chest. The ribs was all smashed in."

Olaf shuddered.

"My prisoner claimed they'd fought each other. When they killed each other, he said he'd robbed them and run out, settin' fire to the cabin. But the jury 'lowed he'd swung that ax hisself."

"He might have been innocent," Olaf faltered.

"Took a bad way of provin' it," the constable contradicted. "If he was tellin' the truth why didn't he come straight to me? We ain't so behind the times in this parish. I took a correspondence course in fingerprints, and I 'low I ain't to be fooled. Easy to tell who swung that ax. Smart fellah can tell who held anything, and when, by finger prints."

"So?" Olaf gasped.

"You're gettin' better right quick," remarked the constable. "Quinine must have done you good . . . Well, since then I investigate when I see any one actin' funny. I got a lot of credit for that arrest. You haven't told me yo' name, now."

"Olaf Svenson," said the sailor quite truthfully. "I work on Da Costa's fishing sloop, from Barataria."

Since all Barataria knew these facts Olaf could see no reason for concealment. The knowledge that he could disprove a charge of murder heartened him; he even grinned, for he had touched neither knife or revolver.

"You thought I was runnin' away?" he asked with simple cunning.

"Just thought something was wrong and that I'd look you over," said the constable. "Reckon you've got malaria, son, and I seen you when the fever shook ou. You'll be better now for fo' hours." The sheriff held out his hand. "Yo' train's coming, Svenson," he said. "Course I had no right to cross-examine you, but when I said murder yo' eyes stuck out like marbles."

"It's all right," Olaf said.

But he did not feel that it was all right until the train bore him from the little village and its over-ambitious constable. Suppose he had set fire to the sloop? They would have hanged him. That constable had studied his face. Wherever he went they could telegraph his description.

OLAF stirred uneasily. The air in the smoking car was hot and thick. His head rang; Da Costa's dead eyes haunted him. For the present he had escaped arrest, but was the emerald less certainly accursed? True, it had prevented him, by the very terror it had inspired, from putting his head in a noose. Perhaps the curse fell only on those whom greed for the gem inflamed to murder. He had not killed or stolen to obtain it but—greed was driving him, too. He had been unable to throw away the jewel, because by selling it he could live in Sweden in idleness, like a gentleman.

Serge Moscowitz must have escaped to sea, only to have the curse play with him cruelly as a cat with a mouse. Perrault had intended to shoot Olaf down. The constable had hoped he was an escaping murderer, hoped to trap him. Since his fingers had touched the gem, danger had hemmed him in. Olaf put his hand in his pocket. The facets of the emerald were smooth and cold. The thing was a stone, not a devil. He was silly as an old woman. How could it be accursed? He would sell it—retire.

Olaf phrased the thought bravely, but he could not rid his mind of doubt.

What he had seen he had seen, and although he fortified himself with a drink after he arrived in New Orleans, he was trembling when he entered a pawn shop.

The shop was shabby and furtive looking. Simple as he was, Olaf knew better than to offer his emerald in a well lighted, pretentious office. They would ask how he had come by it. Only a fence would pay money with no questions asked.

A rusty iron balcony overhung the shop door. It was twilight; a street light in front of the entrance had just flashed into radiance, but the shop entrance was dark. A single electric bulb burned inside. A bell jangled as Olaf entered. An old, bearded man peered through the grille—a dirty, beady eyed man with thin yellow fingers. Long, dirty finger nails that resembled talons.

Upon impulse Olaf did not let go of the

emerald, only trust it through the grille where the light, beating downward, glinted from the facets in live, green fire.

"How much?" he said.

"You are a thief. But I do not know you," the pawnbroker croaked. A pale faced assistant, dressed in a soiled suit of light linen, appeared at the old man's shoulder. He glimpsed the gem and stopped. Emotion fierce and repressed pinched his face.

"I found this in a lifeboat. From a Russian ship," said Olaf. "I will not let you have it. Look while I hold it in my hand."

"From Russia? Ah!" The pawnbroker croaked. He put a glass in his eye and peered at the jewel. The pale faced assistant followed his example.

Olaf knew nothing of the Czar's emeralds, the loot of great estates. He only sensed the intense, the overmastering covertousness of the other two.

"How much?" he repeated.

"Two thousand dollars. There is a flaw. It must be cut to sell!"

"Not enough," said Olaf.

He would have snatched the emerald away, but before he could move his hand the pawnbroker seized him by the wrist. The long nails scratched like claws.

"Ten thousand. That is all I have," the pawnbroker croaked.

"Not enough," said Olaf.

The skinny claw tightened on his wrist.

"You—shall not—go!" whispered the assistant fiercely, and both men measured Olaf with their eyes.

The sailor knew that look. He had seen it on Da Costa's face when the skipper snatched the emerald and reached for a revolver; on Perrault's, when the mate stabbed with his knife.

"Ten thousand, then," Olaf agreed.

Fear of sudden death made his voice husky. To his relief the old man's expression softened into vicious triumph. He bent over the safe, straightened, and began to count yellow backed bills into Olaf's hand. They were many to count—the largest was only a hundred dollars—and all the while the assistant stood with eyes that burned. Not at Olaf now. The prey had become the old man.

Stuffing the money into his pocket the sailor walked swiftly to the door. The breath of the air from the street in his face was like a reprieve from death. As the door closed behind him he saw the pawnbroker, a glass in his eye, gloating over the emerald. The assistant stood behind the old man, his expression unchanged, his right hand moving inch by inch toward something under the counter.

Olaf ran across the street, only to stop, gripped by an overpowering oppression, in a dark doorway on the opposite side. He imagined he heard a thud, a cry. Slowly—and for this the sailor's eyes could vouch—the door of the pawnshop opened. The assistant stepped furtively out. The light of the street lamp falling on his face revealed it to be red and white in patches. His chest rose and fell to swift, shallow breathing. As he turned the light showed a dark red stain which dyed one side of his light colored trousers.

The assistant began to move away. For ten paces he walked. Then every step was faster and faster. He was running when he reached the corner. On Olaf's side of the street a policeman had also noticed the stained trousers. The cop shouted. As the assistant darted out of sight he put his whistle to his lips and blew a warning. Other whistles answered. The cop sprinted out of sight after the fugitive.

"It is cursed!" said Olaf hoarsely.

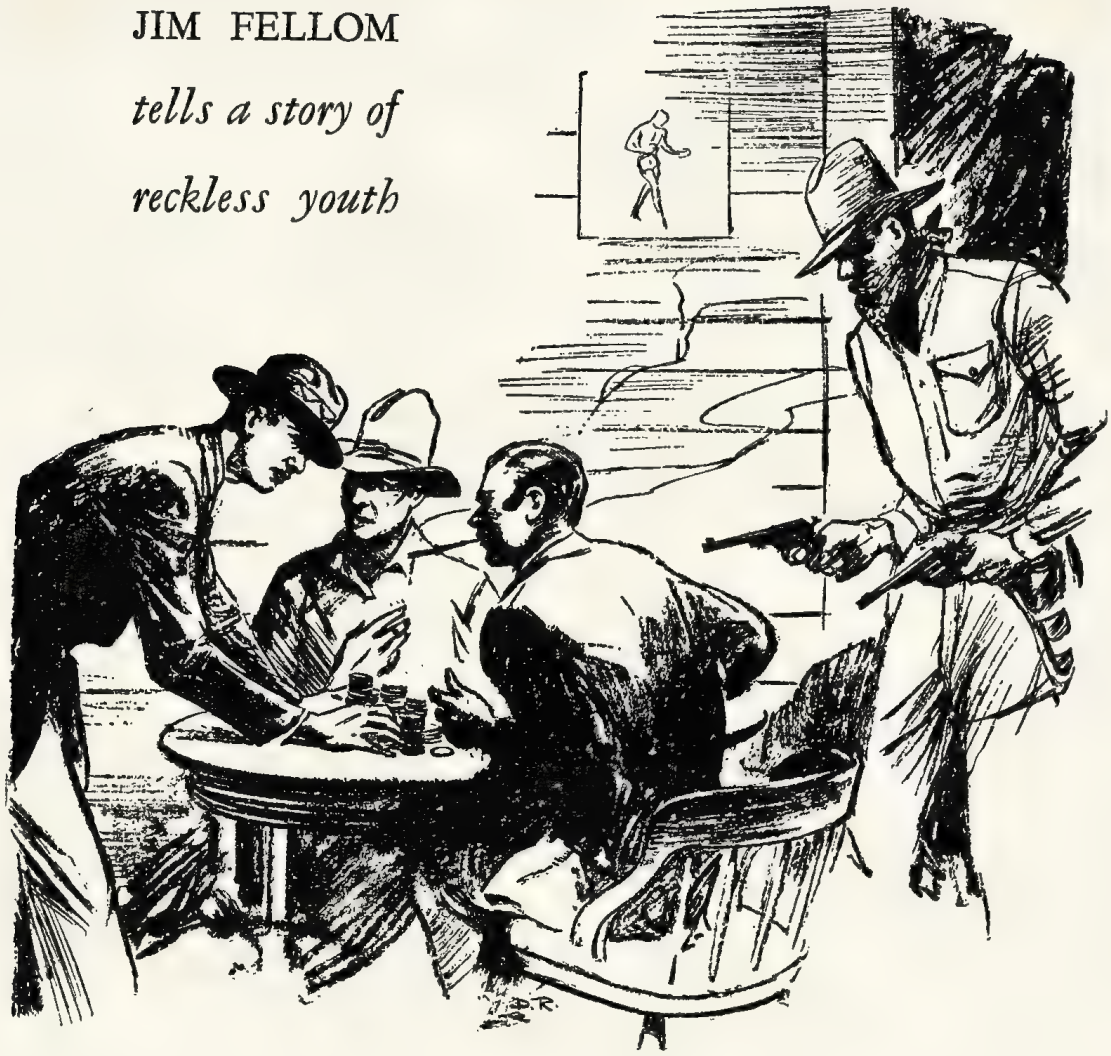
He took the bills he had received and threw them into the gutter. Slowly he forced himself away from the scene, wiping his hands nervously on his shirt to remove the last vestige of contact with the emerald and all its works.

"*Mein Gott!* Ay bane lucky feller!" he muttered in awe.

JIM FELLOM

tells a story of

reckless youth



The SUBLIME SIMP

THE ARGENTINO was a thoroughbred. A little thing like a five hundred dollar bet such as the Heavenly Twins fluttered out on the table, didn't faze him one kilocycle. He lit a perfumed cigaret, smiled sweetly, took a slant at his diamond smeared wristwatch as if his time were valuable, and covered the wager; then he thumbed off several more strips of currency as carelessly as you'd snap your fingers.

"Just to sweeten it up a bit—raise you a thousand," says he in 24 carat English. Harvard graduate and only begotten of a big hide-and-tallow hidalgo of Buenos Aires, he is.

Now it's the Heavenly Twins' turn to smile sweetly.

"You're on, brother! You've tapped a gusher. Jump on the table and bet yourself!" he comes back, and shoves in his pro rata of crisp banknotes—and more besides.

Well, sir, for the next minute or so, those two made the plunging gamblers of the days of '49 look like a throng of pikers. Bet? You'd say so! First one and then the other, steady as clockwork. There didn't seem to be any let-up to them. That little old fashioned parlor never did witness such a spectacle. Poor Bill Smith's gala birthday party comes to a dead stop. All of us invited guests—about twenty, including yours truly—crowd around that center table, like a lot of ants around a drop of honey; forget party and everything else except that heap of green legal tender climbing slowly toward the ceiling.

Even Bill, who is supposed to be celebrating his forty-fourth year on earth, is standing tilted forward like the Tower of Pisa, his eyes popping out as big as golf balls. From the dining room come the maudlin jingle of glasses being placed on the festive board, sort of beckoning us to join them. But nobody seems to hear that persuasive sound, except me.

I don't recall that I've mentioned it, but all this is occurring during the infant days of the gold camp Geerusalem, and the yellow filthy lucre is just bubbling out of the hump backed, wizened old desert. The hills and gulches for a mile around are being disemboweled and dissected. Today's beggar is tomorrow's millionaire; so the cream and clabber of the camp commingle convivially, which accounts for my hobnobbing just then with the upper crust. I'm a pretty keen kid of twenty-two, with a gentle line of Bullsheviki but no coin except what I hope to have. And, of course, I can just about play anything on my ukulele. That uke is my standing invitation. They all fall for the hula stuff.

Anyhow, the Argentino and the Heavenly Twins keep at their little game of freeze-out, calling and raising, calling and raising. It's simply deadly. The suspense is killing us by inches. But it's got to stop sometime. They're bound to run short of ammunition, as you'd call it. Of course, they might start writing out I.O.U's and prolong the agony, I reason secretly.

"Oh, Sid, ain't this terrific!" breathes Marcella's mother in my ear. She's standing alongside of the table holding two matches in one pudgy hand.

But I don't even answer her. I look at the Argentino—sort of dark Apollo of twenty-three, mustached à la Charlie Chaplin, and clad like a member of some swell reception committee. If confidence means anything, he's got the bet won already. Then I glance at the Heavenly Twins—he gets that name from his pair of beautiful baby blue eyes—the snappiest Southwestern Adonis you ever beheld, about the same age as his rival, and togged out in whipcord. He's one of yesterday's beggars. And there's no lost cause expression on his face, either.

Marcella, pretty as a mamma doll, is in close proximity, watching with fluttering breath, her cheeks rosy as peaches. I never did find out which one of the two she favored to win.

But the doggonedest kick of that big exciting moment is the kind of bet that is responsible for all this frenzied financiering. Briefly: these handsome young bloods are rivals for the hand of winsome Marcella; supper had just been announced, and each wanted the honor of escorting her in and sitting beside her. Being good sports, they decided to draw straws, the longest to win the privilege; Mrs. Smith being the official straw holder. As I've said, she's standing alongside of me holding a couple of matches in one pudgy hand. And just when they're about ready to draw, the Argentino says he'll bet the Heavenly Twins a hundred dollars, even money, he'll pull the longest match. Baby Blue Eyes snaps him up, doubles it, and they're off in an insane debauchery of betting, showing off for Marcella's sake. And pretty soon I see jealousy getting in its fine licks. Rage and hatred begin blazing from their eyes as the minutes pass, and that little old pile of wealth keeps growing bigger and bigger. I see Old Man Trouble approaching. Whichever loses is going to start

something, is how I've got it doped out.

And that's about what would have happened, if there hadn't been an unlooked for interruption that all but wrecked the jubilant occasion.

AS I'VE said, all the guests were clustered, on the tiptoe of expectancy, around that ornate center table. The jingle of the glasses was like intoxicating music to my ears; the molehill of green and yellow backs had assumed mountainous proportions; and then, suddenly, sounding through the parlor like the pop of a blacksnake and murderously full of business:

"Hands up—everybody! Hoist them! One move, and I'll shoot wholesale. You, in front there, stand clear of that table. Every one face the wall."

I'd glanced around at the first command and saw, standing on a chair near the front door, a tall raw boned man, a huge gun in each hand, the lower half of his face masked with a blue polka dot handkerchief, his slouch hat pulled down to his bushy brows, his eyes glittering at us like twin beads of jet.

A couple of the ladies uttered little squeaks of alarm. The two jolly gamblers just stood across the table from each other, their arms in the air, and gazed at the nocturnal marauder in sickly surprise. Bill Smith, Marcella's father, rose to the occasion for one brief instant, then flopped again.

"Partner, you're holding up my birthday party. Ain't that rather a cheap, low down proceeding?" he demanded indignantly.

"Shut up, or I'll turn it into a wake," growled the masquerader. "Hey, you kid with the uke! Scrape up that dough and bring it hither. And hustle!'

The kid with the uke was none other than me, and one of his guns was staring me out of countenance. It would have been suicide to disobey. And I was somewhat too young to be over-enthusiastic about dying. So, I sprang to do his bidding, rolled the bills into a big wad I could hardly get my hands around, and went over to present it to his nibs.

"That'll make me a swell chest protector. Deposit it, before I murder you," he said gaily, and leaned over so I could reach his open shirt front. "Now—Back up!"

And, as I retreated a couple of steps, he shot out the light. A magnificent hanging lamp strung with crystals crashed, peppering the room with glass, plunging us in darkness.

The ladies all screamed for somebody to save them. A miniature pandemonium broke loose.

As I've just said, I'd stepped back two paces from our unwelcome visitor. Now, faster than I can tell it, I dropped on all fours and crept forward like a panther. I had more courage than good sense, and I figured on nailing the fellow by the legs, piling him on his head, and capturing him bare handed, guns and all. And, mind you, I had my ukulele in one hand and didn't realize it.

And sure enough, I'd hardly got started crawling when I collided with a pair of shins. Before you could say "Sic-'em" I caught them in a bear hug, gave a quick centrifugal twist and over went the owner, hitting the parlor floor with a crash that rattled the windows. In an instant I was straddled of his back and had a death grip on his throat.

"Drop your guns, pal!" I warned him.

He fought furiously; but the first chance I got, I fumbled around with my loose hand and found he was unarmed. He'd dropped both gats, was what I thought.

Anyway, I called for a light and when one of the boys finally came to my assistance and another brought the lamp from the dining room, I found to my deep mortification that the man I was sitting on and choking the life out of was none other than Bill Smith, the host of the evening, Marcella's father! Like myself, he'd also tried to capture Mr. Bandit. But that gentleman had slipped out the front door and escaped.

I can't tell you how I felt. They resusci-

tated Bill and he suggested that the ladies leave the room. Then he turned to and burned me up—cussed me up one side and down the other, and ended by throwing my hat at me and ordering me out of the house. I never saw a man so unreasonable. And I had to stand and take it. He was Marcella's dad, and though I hadn't a chance alongside of such moneyed sheiks as the Argentino and the Heavenly Twins, I could worship her from afar, as Bill Shakespeare would put it.

Humiliated, crushed, I prepare to depart when I remember my uke, that happy little old sidekicker of mine who is a box office attraction in that backyard of hell. It's lying on the floor at my feet, flattened out like a flapjack. Bill had fallen on it, no less. I stare at it for a few seconds dumbly. Then, as I turn toward the door, I glance around. Marcella has come back into the parlor. She's looking at me in a strange way, but I'm *too broken up over the awful fate of my little uke to want to be looked at.*

Out of the house I went, closing the door after me. The hub of the camp is several hundred yards up-cañon. It was around midnight. A sliver of moon was silvering the topsy turvy landscape. And as I start up the street, what should greet my disconsolate ears but the gallop of a horse fast dwindling into the distance—the bandit riding for his lair?

THAT sound halted me like a blow in the face; what it meant drove me into action like the cut of a quirt across the shoulders. I was disgraced, sore. That damned outlaw cur was the cause of it all. I craved revenge. A sudden wild notion sprang into my brain to get it.

"Sid! Sid!" a voice called to me softly.

I glanced around. Standing on the porch, her white fluffy dress looming ghostly in the shadows, was Marcella. I hesitated an instant, then walked over to her.

"Don't go, Sid," she said gently. "It's all a terrible mistake."

"I certainly will. He's not going to get away with it—" I began; and then it struck me that she meant for me not to quit the party.

But she caught my drift.

"You're—you're surely not taking after him, alone?" she asked anxiously.

"Marcella," said I, "I want you to do me a big favor. Get me a gun and let me borrow your father's lizzie. If I'm not back in two hours, send out after the car. Don't refuse, because I'll only have to go up into camp and get them—and lose valuable time."

She stood looking at me in silence for a moment. I'd never seen her so serious. What she saw in my face satisfied her that I was in dead earnest, I guess, because presently she flitted back in the house, reappearing some seconds later by way of the back door with a six-shooter and cartridge belt threaded full. Her dad's knockabout flivver was garaged out in front and I climbed in and started her up.

"Oh, Sid, why will you take such awful, desperate chances?" cried Marcella, and there was a pleading in her voice—she who had always treated me like a joke.

"It's the other fellow who's taking the chances," said I grimly.

The next moment I was fully launched on my expedition, sailing down the cañon like a skyrocket. You don't have to strain your imagination to see how wild and preposterous I was acting. It's a wonder Marcella hadn't seen it.

In the first place, I stood about one chance in a thousand of getting even a glimpse of Mr. Bandit. He was riding a horse. A horse could climb out of that cañon and go galloping away over the hills; an auto couldn't. And the minute that desperado heard that big noise bearing down on him from the rear—and, boy, how that runabout did rattle!—he'd cut off across country and leave me chasing rainbows, so to speak.

This distressing fact didn't hit me until I'd gone about two miles and was caught in a narrow part of the gorge, choked with massive wash boulders, where I

couldn't have turned the lizzie around if I'd wanted to. I felt ridiculous. I was a sublime simp. It was a cinch that my man had slipped me back there where the hills were scalable. Now I'd have to drive several miles perhaps before I could find a clearing large enough to cramp that flivver around for the return trip.

Gloom never descended on any one as it did on me, as I whizzed on, thinking things over. I visualized my entry into Geerusalem. Bill Smith would make some mighty caustic remarks. The Argentino and the Heavenly Twins would sneer in their superior way. Marcella would greet me with her taunting little laugh, kid me. It would be the clown's funeral.

I was wallowing in the doldrums, when, suddenly, dead ahead, in the glare of my headlights I saw a man come staggering up the road, firing at something behind him. I slammed on the brakes, stopped, and got my own six-shooter ready. The fellow, one hand pressed to his side, came on drunkenly, halting every few steps to shoot at an enemy who appeared to be ambushed in the shadows of the cliffs.

Then, down he fell in a heap, waving his arm wildly in my direction.

"Help! Help!" I heard him gasp in terrified tones.

For ten seconds, I sat like one paralyzed. Not more than thirty yards separated us, and there he lay writhing on the ground, trying to get up and slumping back again; and, all the time, he kept watching down-cañon as if he expected the thing he feared to appear. And that thing, I was pretty darned certain, was the bandit I wanted.

And while I sat there somewhat stunned by this sudden new development, as you'd call it, the man in the road squirmed around and began hollering to me again for help. Just as I came to life and started climbing out of the car to go to him, I caught the flash of a star on his breast. An officer of the law! That surely did jump me into action.

I sprinted recklessly over to his side, gun in hand. He was perhaps twenty-eight, not a bad looking cuss, with a week's beard, and wearing overalls and a leather coat.

"Quick, pal, get me to—to camp! I'm —I'm hit bad. We're in—in danger here. Quick!" he burst out with an effort.

I didn't lose any time. With one glance along the dark foot of the cliffs, I stooped and picked him up in my arms like a good Samaritan, intending to carry him to the runabout. The next instant, I wished I hadn't.

I felt something jab me under the heart and looked down to see him gripping his six-shooter and grinning up at me.

"I'll spare you the trouble of packing me, youngster. Drop your gun and set me on my feet gently! No wise stuff, or I'll crack you open!" said he.

And I recognized the voice of the masked individual who had interrupted poor Bill Smith's birthday party and gotten away with the jackpot.

Not being able to do anything else, I obeyed orders. Disarmed, I walked back to the car with him at my heels.

"Cute little bus, this," he observed, persuading me with his weapon to take the wheel, and sliding in beside me. "I heard you coming a mile away, and figured any kind of a ride would beat hiking. My nag went lame on me—foundered. Say, ain't you the lad that took up the collection for me at the party?"

I nodded. There was no use denying it.

"You're a bright boy, and I'm going to reward you." As he spoke, he pulled the star off his breast and pinned it on mine. "That makes you a life member of the Ancient Order of Mutts. Now, step on her, before I kill you and throw your body overboard."

I NEVER argue with desperadoes. It isn't the best policy. I just gave that runabout the gas and down the cañon we rippled. Very little passed between us. Conversation had no charms for me at that particular time. I was in a horrible

predicament. A jinx was pursuing me and I couldn't shake it.

Things had been bad enough before. I'd assaulted Marcella's father and been fired out of the house, and lost my happy little ukulele sidekicker. But now they were worse. I'd borrowed his rattletrap lizzie and six-shooter to capture this bandit and been captured instead and dispossessed of what I'd borrowed. I hated to think how Marcella's father would feel toward me. Who could say that he wouldn't get a warrant for my arrest? He'd be furious enough to do anything. He might even shoot me on sight; that is, if I succeeded in getting out of my present difficulties alive.

Of course, I'd told Marcella if I hadn't reported back in two hours to send out after the runabout. When I didn't show up, she'd take it for granted I'd met my man and been slain. The news would spread through Geerusalem. Posses would be organized. Half the camp would start out and scour the country. And they wouldn't even find the runabout! That would make it look mighty bad for me—particularly, when they found the bandit's horse. As if the two of us were in cahoots, that I'd been the inside man in the robbery and afterwards procured the car for a quick getaway.

Under my guidance the flivver flew down through that bleak moonlit cañon like a bat out of Hades, taking the turns on two wheels, ricocheting over the straight stretches, rattling and roaring. Mile after mile slipped by us. My passenger sat sideways, holding his gun in his lap trained on me.

"Where are we going?" I inquired finally. The nearest camp was Angostura. thirty miles, and it was more than likely we'd run short of gas before we got there,

"We?" he grunted. "I'm going to bump you off in some nice secluded spot, bury you and drive on. I'd hate to be arrested for kidnapping." He chuckled roughly.

Believe me, I didn't fancy that bit of news. I commenced to wish that I hadn't adventured on this bandit hunting expedition. Not scared, understand? But I didn't relish being foully murdered. Who does?

"I'd suggest that you spare my life. I might come in handy for you," I argued.

His piercing eyes bored through me, sort of appraisingly, then brightened.

"Kiddo, you've talked yourself out of an early grave. I've got a job for you. You can play the ukulele. I listened at the window back there. You're there a million! It'll be up to you to teach me how to tickle one of those little doohickies and sing 'The Honolulu Tomboy'. "

"You're on!" said I, eager as a drowning man reaching for a straw. Anything was preferable to death. "But you'll have to get a uke. Mine was busted in the excitement."

"I've got several—and a hell slough of fiddles and saxophones and banjos. My partner and I are bugs on music. Many's the jazz orchestra we've cleaned in this man's country. Sort of a weakness with us. My buddy saxophones pretty good. Just let me get on to the uke, and me and him'll turn out some mighty swell harmony together, I'll tell the world!"

We struck up quite a conversation, with me doing most of it. He was a treacherous cuss, the kind that never lets his left hand know what his right hand is doing—and, as I've already said, I was pretty certain he'd bomb me without any particular ado.

Well, to skip over the agony, that was a memorable wild night for yours cordially. The lizzie kept loping faithfully along, like a scared jackrabbit, and not giving the least sign of slowing down. It'd be just my luck if the gas tank was full, thought I to myself. Any other time that mechanical toy would have had me out cranking or jacking up one of her pedal extremities. But just then she ran like oil . . .

"Stop her! Stop her!" sang out my passenger suddenly.

And I obeyed. I shut off the gas and slammed on the brakes. *Whe-e-e-e!* scraped the tires, and *bong!* went a blowout. The flivver quivered and grew still.

I DIDN'T have to ask him what was wrong. I saw, now, what he'd been on the lookout for. Peeping out of a gulch that cut away through the range in the direction of Geerusalem was a big car, a swell sedan, parked there, its lights out, waiting. And, I had no more than seen it, than it dawned on me that it stood on what they called the Upper Road, a steep shortcut to Geerusalem, that nobody ever used at night, unless he was drunk or in an awful hurry, it was so doggoned easy to drive off into space.

"Pile out, Mr. Uke, here's where we change cars!" That was me he was addressing and, rather than have to answer a lot of embarrassing questions as to why I wanted to return Bill Smith's gas buggy to him, I granted his request and led the way to the sedan, standing maybe a dozen paces off.

As we approached, a spotlight was flashed on us. A man cursed, almost poetically.

"What're you going to do with that insect?" he snarled, and I had sort of a premonition he was referring to me, which proved correct, for he followed up with, "Haven't we enough to keep us busy without taking prisoners? Why don't you pick something with dough instead of a poor prune like that?"

"Control yourself, you big bum!" replied my captor. "This here is my music instructor, Professor Del Uke. Hop in alongside of my pal, Prof; and don't forget I'll have my gat trained on your cranium."

I slid into the front seat and he into the rear. I sure felt like a rose between two thorns. And, having had some experience with one of those thorns, I now glanced at the other one, just getting the car started. The little light on the dash was on, and by its rays I recognized—You can't guess!

The Argentino! Yes, sir, perfumed cigaret, diamond smeared wristwatch and all! It was him, all right enough, and I stared at him in blank astonishment. The sedan tripped off down the cañon. Pretty soon he shot me an appraising look.

"So you're my friend's private instructor, eh?"

"One can't always choose his pupils," said I. I ain't no slouch at repartee, myself.

He took his eyes off the road again to glance at the star his pal had pinned on me. Then he busted out laughing.

"That's some decoration you've got. Rusty, I see you worked the old dying sheriff stunt again. Atta boy!"

"Why not?" said Rusty. "We're digging out of the country for a spell. I don't need a horse when I can get a chauffeur to drive me. How'd the spring housecleaning pan out?"

I pulled the star off my lapel and looked at it. It was made of tin cut out of an ordinary tin can and rigged with a safety pin for a fastener. Can you imagine it!

"A vacuum cleaner couldn't have done it neater," snickered the Argentino. "I've got all the Smith jewelry, and the old man's strong box. A sweet haul, I'll tell the world. The big kick is I was betting the Heavenly Twins with Bill Smith's money. You timed the holdup to the minute, Rusty, no fooling! As soon as you shot the light out, I got busy. Trustful souls, that Smith family. All their valuables lying nice and handy. Five minutes, and I'm out of the house—pick myself this sedan, and *adios*, Geerusalem!"

He threw me a penetrating glance.

"You're out of luck, kid. You know too much about our business to risk releasing you, and we don't require a chaperon—and Rusty's musical education has just got to wait. Do you get the insinuation?"

Did I *get* it? For the second time within a half an hour my life was in jeopardy. And the uke wasn't a weakness with this handsome young villain. He wasn't a bit temperamental, and I'd not get by so pretty as I had with his partner Rusty.

But before I can reply—I haven't any

idea what my defense will be—Rusty comes to my rescue, as you might say.

"Lay off of the poor fish, Sal! I can't see any use worrying him. Right now he's harmless, Later on, me and you'll discuss a painless method of getting rid of him. Come on, Prof, I crave entertainment. Warble us a vocal solo."

"Yes, give him 'The Prisoner's Song!' " sneered Sal.

"Well, sir, it was up to me to raise my voice in song. I reeled off a couple of the latest hits in my repertoire. And they went over big. It's somewhat romantic, speeding through the country, by night, in a swell closed car with overstuffed plush seats. My hosts began to fall under the influence. Pretty soon they were roaring along with me, and after that we sounded like a delegation of flaming youth in tune with the universe.

Just here is where my little narrative picks up a new element that, I know, won't pep it up near as much as it did me on that memorable occasion. It's this:

While the three of us are bellowing to the starry heavens, my roving eye is attracted by something peeping out of the right hand pocket of Sal's coat. In the light on the dash it gives a blue glint. A sly glance, and I could have swooned with ecstasy. It's an automatic pistol flirting with me.

But I don't swoon. No, sir! I continue to dispense harmony with an abandon I never knew I possessed. And, doggone it, I was singing for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I dig down in the memory bag—I had to keep them both lilting, you understand—and produced such touching ballads as, "How Dry I Am", "Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here!", "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean"; and my left hand is busy all the while, creeping inch by inch for Sal's pocket, itching to get hold of that gun.

"You make a phonograph look sick, big boy," Rusty cheered me from the back seat. "Your jazzy repertoire ain't nothing else but!"

We were moaning away on "Sweet Adeline", when I slipped out Mr. Automatic and sneaked it around behind me into my right hand, and held it hidden against my leg.

SO FAR, so good! I'd got off to a flying start. But I had a risky old road to travel. I kept on singing lustily. In the back seat sat the desperado Rusty, all prepared to give me my quietus at the first suspicious move—and he'd do it with gusto. Alongside of me in front sat the Argentino, Sal, and he was just about due to load his six-inch cigaret holder with another perfumed tailor-made. If he happened to reach in his right hand pocket for the pack and find his automatic gone . . . The chances were he wouldn't even bat an eye. I'd never know he knew it, but he'd pass some innocent remark to Rusty which, translated, would mean that I'd stolen his gun. Crooks have a disagreeable way of being prepared for every exigency. And then the fun would begin. About that time I quit singing.

"Say, men, stop the car. I've got a proposition to make to you. I'd like to talk it over with you," said I.

"Yes? Well any proposition you've got to make, we can listen to traveling, kid. Let's have it!" replied Rusty, suspicious-like, and Sal threw me the same kind of look.

My play, and I let out my top card.

"Why, it's like this. You two fellows seem to me to be pretty square ducks and good gamblers. I'm someway that myself. Just to show you—I'll flip you a coin. Heads, you turn me loose to hike it back to town; tails, I'll take the count without a squeal. Give me a sporting chance for my life."

Rusty didn't answer me, but the slicker, Sal, did, right off the bat.

"Very pretty! Now, I'll tell one. You appear so awful anxious to leave good company that we're going to give you every assistance. You won't even have to waste time flipping a coin. All you have to do is jump out, see?"

As he spoke, he stepped on the gas. The

sedan shot ahead like a bullet. The headlights showed a long stretch of cañon, its bed on either side of the road choked with heavy wash boulders. To jump would be worse than being shot.

I took a fresh grip on the automatic. Then:

"Rusty, open the door! This bird is going to take the air. Now, bozo, on your way!" ordered Sal.

He reached into his coat pocket for his gun, intending to shoot me as I leaped out. I stood up suddenly. Rusty had stooped over to reach the door handle. He was just straightening up—and I dropped him with a short hard smash of the automatic alongside of the head. Then I drove the weapon into Sal's neck.

"Pull up, cutie, before I commit murder!" said I.

The next moment, my eyes never leaving him, I'd crawled over the front seat and disarmed Rusty. There were three six-shooters, one of them Bill Smith's. Sal brought the sedan to a stop. He dragged his unconscious sidekicker into the seat I'd occupied, took the wheel again and I made myself comfortable on the rear cushions—and I was pretty doggoned relieved it had turned out the way it had.

"Say, sport, now I've got a proposition to make you," said Sal sweetly. "You're a poor devil, shy of coin. It's tough sledding for you, and I know it. Maybe we've been a little rough with you, and I'm sorry. Just suppose, you take the proceeds of tonight's haul—it'll give you a good start—and dig out of the country. I'll drive you to the railroad, you go your way and we'll go ours, and forget we ever met. What do you say?"

"All I've got to say is head this car up-cañon and keep driving till you reach Geerusalem. I may be a life member of the Ancient Order of Mutts, but I've got a gun in my hand that just might accidentally explode in your direction. Laugh that off!" I replied grimly.

So, you see, this goes to show you how a fellow's luck can change just when all but the last prop is knocked out from under you and you're going into a nose dive. Up you soar again. That's what makes living interesting.

Anyway, to add a few inconsequential details, we meet a machine load of deputy sheriffs bristling with arms and ammunition. They're starting out of camp as we come rolling in.

The Heavenly Twins is among the first to greet me. He wrings my hand warmly.

"My friend," said he, "I want to thank you for bringing back my sedan without a scratch. You have done me a service for which I'll never be able to pay you."

"We can see that plain enough," snapped out Bill Smith nastily. To me, he said, "Kid, come into the house while I make you out a check for junking my old tin lizzie. And I want to apologize for wrecking your ukulele."

He dragged me inside by the arm and closed the door. The parlor was dark; the visitors had gone home; but by the light coming in through the dining room entrance I saw Marcella standing a few feet away looking at me—smiling! And, boy, such a smile!

Her father gave her one look, then he sort of whispered back of his hand to me, loud enough for her to hear:

"Marcella picked up every little busted piece of that uke, son, wrapped them carefully up in her ma's silk shawl and put them in her hope chest. Some of these days when you run short of kindling—"

"Daddy! Daddy!" cried Marcella, half sobbing.

". . . you can order some more. Sid, my boy, I've got a good job for you at the store. Maybe you don't know it, but all those valuables you saved belonged to Marcella's mother. Money can't buy them," said Bill Smith gravely.

"Sid! You're wonderful—and—and I'm so—so—yes, proud of you, Sid!" hesitated Marcella as her father left the room. She put out her two little hands and I put them in mine, and—well, you can guess the rest!

TO BE DELIVERED

A Tale of the Florida Everglades

By ROLAND PHILLIPS

AS HE STEPPED out upon the platform of the coach, Kemp saw the vestibule door was standing ajar, and with a sweep of his foot kicked it wide open. The deputy, whose left wrist was manacled to his prisoner's right, bellowed a warning and jumped back, wrenching at the short chain. But he was too late. Kemp's free left arm encircled the man's waist, lifted him bodily from the platform, and the next instant both catapulted dizzily into the fierce white heat of Florida sunshine. The train rumbled on, minus two of its passengers.

The high swamp grass and the soft mud cushioned their fall somewhat, but the landing drove the breath from their lungs. Both lay sprawled a dozen feet beyond the tracks, flattened, inert. The grass hid them, the mud squashed beneath their bodies and the hot, ocher dyed water soaked through their clothing.

Kemp opened his eyes and blinked at the luminous sky overhead. A stab of pain in his wrist brought him alert. Lifting it, and his companion's as well, he saw where the steel bracelet had gouged the flesh. Blood etched a crimson filigree along his arm and down his fingers. He moved his body, uncoiled his limbs and finally sat erect. A little bruised and shaken, that was all. Lucky.

The deputy sprawled beside him, his

eyes closed, his sunburned face flecked with mud. No time to waste, Kemp thought, and immediately went fumbling through his companion's pockets. He must find the key; must unlock that narrow ribbon of steel that encircled his wrist. Once released, he would be off and they would never find him again. Never. Beyond lay the vast uncharted Everglades; across it, the peaceful Gulf. Give him five minute's start and he would laugh at pursuit.

But the deputy's pockets, rifled, gave up no key. Everything but that; money, tobacco, a watch, a gun. Kemp tossed them aside, swearing softly to himself. Apprehension prickled him. The thing he sought must be somewhere in the officer's possession. Must be. He made a second search, slowly this time and with infinite care, exploring every pocket of the man's shirt and coat and trousers. Still no reward.

Kemp was assured that physically he was a match for his companion. He had nothing to fear there. But it was to no advantage. Not so long as the bracelet clamped his wrist; linked him inseparably to the deputy. He had a long journey ahead of him and he meant to travel alone.

He lifted his head and saw a field of shimmering grass on every side but one. They were far from any road or habitation, and no one would blunder upon them. A passing train was all that threatened now.

Some distance away, rising like an island in the sea of grass, he glimpsed a cypress hammock. It promised shade and refuge, a screen against prying eyes, a haven in which to perfect his still uncertain plans. A way of escape must be found—and swiftly. The cuffs, glittering in the sun, seemed to mock his helplessness; tortured him. He scowled and pawed at his moist face, aware of the predicament confronting him.

Assured that the deputy had managed to conceal the key, he prodded the man beside him, splashed the hot, yellow water into his face, bellowed in his ear. And presently the officer grunted and batted his eyes, to find himself staring into a countenance both familiar and forbidding.

"Sit up!" Kemp barked. "I'm givin' you half a minute to fish out that key!"

The deputy blinked and sat up in the mud.

"You—you jumped off the train!" he got out. "You—"

"Sure," Kemp answered. "Didn't want to take you with me, but how was I to help it? That's what you get for hitchin' me to your wrist."

The other drew in a deep breath, gazed incredulously about him and began to explore his body with his free hand. He seemed infinitely relieved to find himself whole and unhurt.

"You got your nerve," he growled presently. "A good thing we lit in the mud."

"Won't be so good for you if you don't fish out that key." Kemp jerked impatiently at the chain. "Come on, now. Fork it over. We ain't travelin' together no longer."

The deputy looked down at the shining chain that linked the two bracelets.

"You ain't getting away," he stated.

"The hell I ain't! Think I hopped off the train and got bogged down here for the fun of it? Where's that key? Where'd you hide it? I been through your pockets."

"You mean the key to these irons?"

"Of course."

The deputy studied a moment, his lips twitching.

"If I recollect right I don't have a key on me."

"You're lyin'! You won't get far that way. I'll strip you. I'll bury you in the mud."

"I left the keys to home. Got away in a hurry this morning and forgot them."

Kemp's lean hand darted out and his fingers gripped the speaker's throat. The deputy cursed. His doubled fist smashed into Kemp's face. Both men reared to their knees. The deputy's blows had steam behind them; hurt. But unmind-

ful of the punishment, Kemp forced the man backward, pressing his head down, down, through the saw edged grass into the muddy water. The deputy squirmed and kicked out like a speared frog, making inarticulate sounds that had the water bubbling about his ears.

When Kemp released him, the man rolled over, gasping, his face streaked with mud and slime.

"I told you what I'd do," Kemp shouted. "I'll do it some more if you keep on lyin'."

THE DEPUTY pawed the mud from his lips.

"I'm—telling you the truth," he protested huskily.

"Dig up that key or I'll dig you a grave!" Kemp's face darkened. "I'm not mindin' to stay here. I got to start travelin'."

"You know I ain't got it," the other flung back. "You been through my pockets. I couldn't hide the key."

"Give you half a second to fork it over, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" The deputy raised himself and leered. "What'll you do? Nothing! You can't!" He laughed contemptuously. "You won't hurt me. Can't afford to. You see that now, don't you? Stove me up and you'll have a load to carry. A couple hundred pounds."

Kemp glared at his companion, his fingers twitching, yet hesitating to carry out his threats, suddenly, realizing, the futility of it. The deputy might be telling the truth. Certainly the key would have been found, if the man had had it on him. Better go easy, he reflected. Must not be fettered to a cripple—or a corpse.

"Where are we?" the deputy queried presently.

"Far enough off so nobody's goin' to stumble on us."

Kemp's voice was thick with rising bitterness and fury. So near freedom; the woods beckoning; just a dozen thin links of chain to hold him prisoner. Still he must not give up.

The deputy began collecting the articles Kemp had raked from his pockets, rescuing them from among the tufts of grass. When he pawed for the revolver, Kemp beat him to it.

"I'll take this!"

"You're welcome." The deputy seemed unperturbed. "We're not using it for a while. Neither of us. Not so long's we're linked together."

Kemp knew that; but a gun was handy to have. He crammed it into his pocket and lurched to his feet, yanking the deputy's arm. To ease the strain on his wrist, the latter stood up.

Bareheaded, disheveled, clotted with mire, they squinted into the sun to get their bearings. Standing, they were of the same height—lean, muscular products of the out-of-doors, seasoned by wind and weather of the semi-tropics. The deputy was heavier, older.

The sight of the glistening rails beyond put an idea into the deputy's mind.

"If you're sensible you'll stay right here. We can flag the next train."

Kemp ignored that. His hopeful eyes rested upon the distant cypress hammock where the shadows were cool and friendly.

"Come along," he ordered. "We'll start travelin'."

The deputy shrugged resignedly and kept in step with his captor. They crossed the tracks, descended on the far side, pushed on. There were patches of dry ground and Kemp zigzagged from one to another, his companion following. The sun was noon high, relentless; white herons were feeding in the shallows and above them buzzards soared lazily.

They reached the fringe of trees and sat down, grateful for the shade. Kemp stared across the swamp where the heat waves were dancing. He had to think—think fast, plan.

His companion divined his thoughts.

"Don't be a damned fool. You can't get rid of me—and you can't drag me along."

"I'll get rid of you," Kemp responded confidently.

"We got nothing to eat and the mosquitoes will be swarming like fury pretty

soon," the other continued. "Better get back to the railroad."

Kemp hunched against the tree, tight lipped. Eating did not worry him, nor mosquitoes. He had always found grub when he needed it, found a way out of difficulties, too. Took time, though.

The deputy began asking questions.

"You come from below, don't you? South of Porpoise Point? Among the islands? Supposed to be a fisherman and guide, aren't you?"

Kemp nodded indifferently, his mind remote, and the other went on:

"That's a long stretch to travel. Forty, fifty miles maybe."

Kemp snapped that he did not care if it was a hundred. He intended to make it, get back among the mangrove keys where he belonged. Did not propose to surrender. Things had been bad enough this morning and they would be worse now, after his break. He would not have a chance.

"I'd rather furnish a meal for the buzzards than spend another day locked up in a stinkin' jail," he burst out.

The deputy did not seem pleased at that prospect.

"You can't get far like this, Kemp. Come back with me. I'll do what I can to let you off easy," he held out.

Kemp laughed.

"A lot you'd do. They got me charged with shootin' to kill. Huh, I could have finished him easy as winkin' had I a mind to. Ought to have done it, the way things happened."

"I wasn't at the hearing. Bound you over, didn't they, on Grable and his partner's testimony? Said you was an ugly customer from below and always in trouble. A plume hunter, too. That's why I used these bracelets."

Contempt flared into Kemp's dark face, but he had no answer. Why should he care what they said or thought?

"Why'd you shoot Grable? Bothering you?"

"Wouldn't let him bother me."

"But you shot him. Why didn't you stick in your own district? It's safer. The law don't get that far—often."

KEMP flipped his head around.

"First time I been this far north. I wouldn't have come 'cept I was guidin' a good kid."

The deputy nodded.

"You got into this scrape just through helping some one?" he ventured.

"The kid deserved helpin'. I liked him a lot, only he was foolish. Not more'n twenty and I wasn't lettin' a sneak like Grable nail him."

Again the deputy nodded, gave his companion a sidelong look.

"Just what happened?"

"What you want to know for?" Kemp snapped irritably. "No use in talkin' so much. Save your breath; you'll be needin' it."

"I'd just like to hear, that's all."

The deputy hitched himself into a more comfortable position, his left shoulder against Kemp's right. Their manacled hands lay between them, inert, palms down—two powerful, sun bitten hands that might have belonged to the same man, so near alike they were.

"Where's this kid you mentioned?" the deputy pursued.

"I got him away."

"Wouldn't his testimony have helped you some? Funny he'd duck, leaving you in trouble."

"He had a dozen plumes on him, that's why," Kemp flung out. "You know what that would get him. That's why I sent him scuttlin'. It was Grable who walked in on our camp and spotted the contraband."

"Oh, I see, I see," the other murmured. He must have recalled something of what he had heard that morning. "Egrets, were they? You in that traffic?"

Resentment smoldered in Kemp's eyes.

"Not me! Never mind what you been told. I'm not takin' that kind of money. Didn't know what the kid was up to till he brought in the birds. Swore he didn't know about the law; but he was lyin'." The facts came quickly now. "I got it out of him he'd promised to smuggle in some plumes for a man in Tampa. Easy

money, he thought. Before we got rid of 'em, Grable shows up."

"So you plugged him, got the kid away, eh?"

"He was just a kid, I told you, and I liked him," Kemp said earnestly. "I've run across Grable before, down below. Up to dirty work himself and always tryin' to stand in with the revenue fellows so's they don't go watchin' him too close. That's his breed.

"The kid was scared and reaches for a gun before I could stop him. I seen Grable doin' the same and got him first—in the shoulder. I knew he had a partner somewheres around, who'd look after him, so me and the kid lit out. I got him to the river and on a sloop bound up the coast. He was blubberin' and sick, I can tell you, and swore he'd learned a lesson. When I was comin' back the next day, Grable and his partner jumps me. He wasn't so bad hurt as I figured, and he'd got the plumes, too, only nothin' was said about 'em. He knew what I'd done, findin' me alone; know I couldn't do no talkin'. But he meant to get even."

"You had a tough break all around," the deputy conceded, as if he believed the story. "Most of your kind do, to hear you tell it."

A whistle sounded faintly on the still air and a train appeared in the distance, crawling across the swamp. Kemp idly turned his head, following it. They had not reached the hammock any too soon, he thought, watching the snail-like progress of the rumbling freight. Been spotted sure, out there.

The deputy also watched and his breath quickened. The farther they left the rails behind, the more remote his prospects of coping with a desperately unpleasant situation. A plunge into the labyrinth beyond—endless miles of it—would be suicide. The thought tormented him, goaded him into action.

His lumped right fist spurted from his hip and landed solidly on the point of Kemp's brown jaw. He twisted and flung himself upon his victim, bearing him to the ground, smashing blow after blow into the man's unprotected face.

That was not necessary, he saw an instant later, for Kemp had crumpled at once, his head snapping back. He lay limply among the palmetto roots. The deputy, still wary, inched aside, his eyes probing the gray pallor that crept under Kemp's wash of tan. There was a trickle of crimson across the man's cheek.

The victor nursed his hand, wriggled his fingers speculatively to assure himself they were still intact. Kemp's jaw had been as unyielding as flint rock. Before he sat back, content with his job, he plucked the revolver from the other's pocket. Then he waited, patiently at first, later with mounting concern, for his prisoner betrayed no signs of returning consciousness.

The train had disappeared, leaving a smudge against the sky. Another, he knew, would be along before dark. But it was a mile—more—to the tracks; the going uncertain, treacherous. The deputy pondered. Perhaps he should not have hit so hard. If Kemp was out for some time, he would have to carry him, and that was not pleasant to contemplate.

He grabbed Kemp by the shoulders, snaked him through the bramble of underbrush to a pool, sluiced the water into the man's face. Kept it up endlessly, it seemed. At length Kemp's eyes snapped open and he sucked in a deep breath. An instant later he heaved himself erect.

The deputy grinned.

"Feeling better?"

"About the same." As he rubbed at his thumping jaw, Kemp's glance strayed to the other's free hand. "You got a punch," he commended.

"Always keep a good one in reserve for emergencies."

"You made sure I wasn't lookin'."

"I wasn't looking to be snatched through the vestibule door," the deputy retaliated.

THEY surveyed each other with measured, challenging glances, their lips twitching. Still squatting, the deputy dug the gun from his pocket and held it snugly in his hand.

"I'm running things now," he announced. "We're going back to the railroad. That's settled."

"Train's gone."

"Be another along."

The deputy elevated himself and prodded Kemp with his toe.

"Let's start. No funny business, now."

Kemp reared himself with an effort, his head spinning. He clung to a tree a moment, batting his eyes.

"You get in the lead and go back the way you came. I'll have this gun poked into your hind ribs," the deputy reminded him.

"You won't shoot," Kemp taunted.

"Try me! I can pack you near enough to the tracks."

"Not so easy as you think—out there."

"We likely been missed before now. They'll be sending back this way for us. I can signal. You haven't got a chance."

"Plenty of 'em." Kemp's grimace persisted, undeterred by the bleak, agate eyes leveled upon him.

The deputy fondled the gun.

"Get going!"

With the gun muzzle jabbing his ribs, Kemp started off, treading softly, seeking the trail he had blazed before. His head was still groggy, his jaw had begun to swell. His face felt lopsided. He strode on, picking the higher bits of ground.

The deputy remained in step and never once relaxed the pressure of steel against Kemp's wet back. But his attention was divided between planting his own leather in the print left by his guide, and keeping his mind alert to frustrate any unforeseen move on the part of his prisoner.

Long strides, shorter ones; now together, now alternating. They advanced across the swamp with machine-like precision. The skirted pools of fetid water were treacherous, the earth greasy with slime. Slate colored herons flapped away ahead of them.

A hundred yards from the hammock Kemp's foot slipped from a grass clump and without warning his knee doubled under him. The deputy blared a warning as his prisoner sagged and the chain on his wrist grew taut. The gun spat, but Kemp was below it. Next, the deputy was floundering in the mud that sucked at his limbs and Kemp's free arm had cradled him; hugged him closely.

Together they weaved and sank, thrashing at the water that bubbled at their waists. The deputy wrenched free from his prisoner's embrace, but when he jerked his gun arm aloft, Kemp's darting fingers clamped themselves about the weapon. Face to face the pair swayed, the twin cuffs glinting in the sun as the wrists within them tugged and squirmed; the short chain spun about.

Kemp tore away the weapon and, with a flirt, pitched it upon dry ground. Now the rising water, churned into thick slime, was above their waists. No longer they slashed and battered one another, but sought to save themselves.

"Hold still!" Kemp snarled.

He reached out, clawing at the grass roots, endeavoring to steady himself. And because the deputy seemed too weak or panicky to obey, he clouted him savagely across the head with his manacled hand.

"If you want to get out, do what I'm sayin'," he panted. "Take it slow, easy. You'll sink if you don't. Easy, you hear?" Then he swore as the other's eyes closed. "Don't go faintin'."

"Faint—hell!" the other jeered. But his voice shook.

"Get hold my shoulder first. Steady!"

The deputy obeyed. Kemp leaned forward, his fingers digging into the bank. Bogged down before—worse than this—he knew how to extricate himself. But it was more difficult with another clinging to him—so much dead weight.

His anchored fingers held against the terrific strain; muscles bulged as his arm bent. Inch by inch his body lifted from the water, the deputy's with it.

"Catch hold," he commanded, nodding toward the bank.

The man did so. The second cable of muscle helped tremendously.

Kemp was out now flat on his belly, wriggling along like a moccasin. Turn-

ing, he extended both his hands toward the deputy. Their fingers interlocked. Up the man came; slithered beside him.

Both lay quietly a moment getting their wind. The deputy seemed spent, breathing heavily, indifferent to what went on about him. When he rallied and sat up, it was to find Kemp watching him, a smirk on his lips, the gun again in his possession.

"Scared, wasn't you?" Kemp jibed. "Almost gave up. Figured you was done for."

"A trick, wasn't it?" the deputy charged. "No accident."

Kemp snickered.

"Maybe it was."

"You'll crow about saving me. Won't get you nothing."

"I was lookin' out for myself—mostly. Stir yourself. We're marchin' back."

For a third time the pair tramped across the familiar stretch of swamp, each alert, watchful, but with a certain marked deference in their shuttling glances. The hammock reached, Kemp took a squint at his companion and grinned.

"Feelin' better?" he asked.

The deputy looked disgusted.

"About the same."

Slime dripped from their clothes; mud and filth caked them, already hardening under the sun. Instinctively they drifted toward a pool of clear water, dropped upon all fours, drank first and afterward laved their scratched and bleeding faces.

Craving a smoke, Kemp eyed the sack of tobacco that bulged in his companion's shirt pocket. The deputy interpreted the look and shook his head.

"It's soaking wet," he declared. "Besides, I got no papers. I'd appreciate a drag myself," he added regretfully.

"Let's start, then," said Kemp.

The deputy stood up. "O. K.," he said.

They moved off along the edge of the hammock, rubbing shoulders, left arm swinging against right, the cuffs flashing in the sun, the chain clinking. Kemp chivalrously pocketed the gun and won a smile.

MILES they trudged with no word between them; across swamps, through high saw grass, plowing the thick palmettos that raked at their legs, winding through dimly lighted aisles of pine and oak and palm, where funereal streamers of moss draped itself; out into the vivid sunshine again, the air stifling, the heat crackling against their bodies.

They waded pools where masses of hyacinth floated like purple clouds; pushed their way through barriers of tangled vines, scaring up myriad birds. As if following a worn trail, Kemp strode on. Nor did his companion lag. Head up, he kept in step, unhesitating, uncomplaining.

"Gettin' tired?" Kemp twitted, hours later.

"Not a bit," the other assured him.

Lying, Kemp thought; but the man was game and he admired him for it. He squinted a speculative eye at the sun that bore through the mop headed cabbage palms. They were making good time, all right.

Civilization slipped behind them. The Gulf lay beyond; the shimmering, peacock Gulf that embroidered the shores of the scattered, coral keys. His country; refuge; sanctuary. A long way yet, Kemp told himself, but he would surely reach it. Every step so much nearer.

"Another day we'll be close," he said, speaking aloud his thoughts.

"You'll never make it. You're just wasting your time and mine. By tomorrow I'll have you locked up—for good."

Kemp laughed softly, carelessly.

"You'll have to come back alone. But you won't get hurt. I'll see to that."

"Huh, you're dreaming."

"Sure," agreed Kemp. "Nice dreams. I'm bein' married the end of the week—to the prettiest girl among the keys."

His eyes shone and his bruised lips patterned a smile.

"You won't see her for the next ten years," pronounced the deputy.

"You'll see her yourself—maybe tomorrow or next day."

There was a singing in Kemp's heart as he lengthened his stride.

Suddenly his free, swinging hand came in contact with his pocket; prodded it. His smile dissolved. The gun was gone. Exploring fingers darted into his coat pocket to find the bottom had been ripped out. Well, no difference. The deputy would not know.

The sun became a vermilion wafer and mist blurred the jungle beyond when they stumbled across a snaky, rutted road. The deputy brightened and shot a glance at his companion. The pines around them had been freshly bled; pots were at their base. That bespoke a nearby turpentine camp—aid. Strange that Kemp should follow the road.

The shadows were deepening when Kemp finally halted and turned to his companion.

"I just want you to understand," he began abruptly, "you got nothin' to lose; me, everything. You know I ain't a trouble maker. I'm goin' home and I'm gettin' married."

Amused tolerance gleamed in the deputy's heavy lidded eyes.

"Forget it! You got no chance."

"I been savin' and plannin' for a long time," Kemp continued, undeterred. "I got me a new boat. Mullet's runnin' and I can make money."

"Too bad, the way things turned out," his companion observed cynically. "Too bad. Maybe the girl will wait. Some of 'em are that way. But she won't be so pretty then—in ten years."

"You can't help my escapin'. They won't do nothin' to you."

"I got you tied and labeled to be delivered to the sheriff," the other remarked steadily. "That's my job and that's what I'm doing. Nobody's ever got away from me yet."

"There's always a first time," Kemp said.

He reached over and plucked the mud caked badge from the deputy's shirt, wiped it off and pinned it upon his own. The deputy smiled bleakly.

"When we meet folks," Kemp warned, "I'm doin' all the talkin'. You try anything foolish and I'm shootin' quick." He tapped his left coat pocket—empty pocket—significantly.

A creak of wheels brought them both alert, tingling. Coming toward them through the dim aisle of road, lurched a wagon, a mule between the shafts, a hunched figure of a man on the swaying seat.

The newcomer drew rein, his eyes widening at sight of the strange pair who advanced to meet him.

"Hello," cried Kemp. "You live 'round here?"

The man spat deliberately.

"A piece beyond."

The driver made out the shining bracelets and the insignia on Kemp's shirt. His jaw sagged.

"Say," he gasped, "you—you the deputy that was dragged off the train up near Anders this mornin'?"

Kemp was startled.

"How'd you know?"

"Radio over to camp," the man answered. "Been sendin' out the alarm for an hour. The boys are gettin' a posse together, figurin' maybe you'd be in this section."

Excited, he scrambled from his seat and dropped in front of the two, peering into their faces.

"Prisoner didn't get away from you, did he?"

Kemp grinned.

"Couldn't," he stated, and lifted his cuffed wrist, bringing the deputy's with it. "Besides, the key's been lost."

The man chuckled.

"Had to stayed hooked, did you? Must have had a time, though, from the looks of things. How'd you get this far? Your name's Higbee, ain't it?"

Kemp did not answer, only looked fixedly at the deputy. The man ran on.

"I'll take you far's my place; the posse'll likely be along any minute. Say, you must have had a time of it," he repeated. "Some of the boys know you and said they bet you'd come through all right."

He looked pleased.

THEY crawled awkwardly into the rear of the wagon and let their legs dangle. The wheels squeaked as the driver thumped the mule.

"You're done for now," the deputy jeered softly.

Kemp turned to scan the grinning, triumphant face so close to his own.

"Didn't know you was Higbee," he said. His voice had changed.

"What of it?"

"Nothin'."

The wagon jolted to a halt presently on the edge of a clearing. A cabin and shed and a field of green cane loomed beyond. Kemp's eyes swept about him. No one appeared, the premises seemed deserted, and he felt relieved. For a time he would not be handicapped with too great odds. But he had to think fast. Had to get free from that binding circlet of steel.

"My wrist's gettin' pretty raw," he remarked, when they alighted. "Maybe you got a file handy to cut this chain."

The man nodded. When he had put up the mule he came back with a heavy rasp. The pair followed him into the cabin. It had grown darker and the man struck a light, putting the lamp on the table. Then, with the two men sitting on a bench, he thrust a knee between the linked wrists, held the chain taut and began to work.

The deputy looked on in silence, apparently unconcerned; occasionally his lips twitched, as if the situation amused him. The man labored industriously. Frail as it seemed, the chain was of case hardened steel, reputed to be file proof. At any rate it stood up valiantly against the attack.

"Goin' to take a week gettin' through," the man grumbled. "Ought to go to camp. Got better files there."

The deputy's smile grew more pronounced and he lounged back against the wall.

The file had made little impression upon the steel link. An hour's work might wear it through. An hour! An interminable delay when seconds were so precious, Kemp reflected. His troubled glance took in the confines of the room while he speculated on what he would do if the posse rode up suddenly. With some of its members knowing Higbee, capture would be inevitable.

"Think the boys'll come this way?" Kemp asked.

"Hope so. Save 'em a lot of trouble if they do."

It was a question then—a slim chance that the night might pass without interruption. Higbee's confident smile melted under that remark and he seemed to be disturbed. The man with the rasp, unaware of the fears that racked the minds of his visitors, labored on.

Throughout the operations, Kemp's left hand remained buried in his coat pocket, a grim reminder to the deputy—who could not know differently—that a rash move, an unguarded word, would bring instant death.

When the man rested a moment, Higbee stirred and spoke for the first time.

"I'd like a smoke, if you don't mind."

Kemp's own throat and ragged nerves craved that stimulant and he looked hopefully at the stranger.

"Got the makin's?" he inquired.

The man apologized.

"Sorry. Got some papers, but I'm clean out of smokin' tobacco."

The deputy eased the sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket and flipped it toward the speaker.

"Maybe this is dry enough now," he stated, his eyes fixed upon the man. "Roll a couple, will you?"

The man obligingly laid aside his file, opened the sack, inserted his fingers and spilled some of the tobacco upon the edge of the table. As he did so, Higbee swore, his face livid with rage, for something, tumbling out with the golden flakes, clinked as it struck the wood; glinted in the lamp light. The man stared at the object. Kemp cried, reared and lunged, only to have the deputy's free arm encircle him and momentarily hold him imprisoned.

"Cover him!" the deputy bellowed to

the astounded man. "Don't you see? I'm Higbee! I'm Higbee, you hear? That's the key I've kept hid! Cover him, you blundering fool! He's armed!"

The man fell back a step, whipping a gun from his hip, his dull mind beginning to grasp at last what had been screeched in his ear. But Kemp heaved and twisted, indifferent to the pistol that menaced him. He and Higbee spun about; thudded to the floor. As they rolled over, Kemp was uppermost, his arm wrenched free and slashing viciously.

Then the other man was upon him, knees grinding into his back, hammering at his head with the butt of the revolver. Kemp was insensible to the terrific punishment. He squirmed and bunched his shoulders, flung off the new enemy, drove a sledgelike fist into the man's dark face; laughed as the man spilled and skidded against the wall. Still laughing, he wobbled to his feet.

HIGBEE reached out with a hooked arm, tripped him. Again they were grappling and thrashing upon the floor. When the deputy suddenly lay still, Kemp got to his knees, wiping the blood from his eyes, spitting it from his lips, shaking his head. He dragged Higbee across the floor, reached over the edge of the table and groped for the key. His eager fingers found and clutched it exultantly.

Thunder filled the room as the other man, propped against the wall, fired—and missed. Kemp lurched toward him, dragging Higbee, kicked the gun from his hand and cracked a savage heel against his skull. Turning, he flopped upon the deputy, who had struggled to an elbow. The impact drove the breath from Higbee, and Kemp's knotted fist—the key held grimly within it—connected again with the deputy's battered countenance.

Rolling over, his shaking fingers fitted the key to the manacle; turned it. The cuff parted—sprang open. He shook the thing loose from his wrist with a quivering sob. Free! He was on his feet, weaving toward the door, when he heard the thud of hoofs, a voice raised.

He wheeled and made for the open window at back. Higbee reared in his path and tackled him. But Kemp had two free hands now and he laughed as he flailed them; sent the deputy sprawling. As lightly as a cat he hurtled through the window, picked himself off the ground and bounded into the thick standing cane that closed behind him. The friendly stars in the south beckoned.

A man clattered noisily into the room.

"Hello, Higbee!" he cried, astounded "What the—?"

"Prisoner — got away," the deputy choked, as the man pulled him erect. "Where's the posse?"

"Right behind. I stopped in to see—" The newcomer broke off to gape at the crumpled form on the floor.

"Never mind him!" Higbee growled. "His fault Kemp got away."

The posse rode into the yard and their leader appeared in the cabin door. He stared at the scene before him, spat questions, endeavored to absorb a few of the particulars that tumbled from the deputy's lips.

"That's all right," the man shot back crisply. "We'll get your man. Feel like comin' along with us?"

"Of course. Can't afford to lose Kemp now."

The posse leader shook his head dubiously as he contemplated his battered friend.

"Say, man, you must have had one hell of a time. Look all in."

"Nothing much," Higbee assured him. "Had Kemp hooked tight—would have out-smarted him, except this idiot here couldn't think fast enough."

He glared down at the man on the floor who was beginning to show signs of returning life.

"He dumped out the tobacco—right in plain sight, instead of—"

"Tobacco?" the other exclaimed. "What'd that have to do with it?"

"Had the key to the irons hid in it," the deputy explained. "Always play

safe that way, traveling with a prisoner. Kemp got my gun; passed himself off as me. Started filing the chain. I was afraid you boys might not show up in time, so I got busy. Figured this blockhead, when I asked him to roll me a smoke, would feel and spot the key—get wise to what was going on, and act. Could have—easy enough. But the damned fool didn't tumble till too late."

"Not too late yet!" the leader cried. "We'll nab Kemp. Bad egg, ain't he? Pull yourself together and we'll start. Say, I been wonderin' about you, Higbee," the man went on, taking the deputy's arm. "Ain't seen you nowheres in months. Funny thing I run across that kid of yours three, four days ago and was askin' how you was. And here you pop up. Funny, ain't it?"

Higbee, shuffling across the floor between the men, wavered in his tracks.

"You saw—Benny? Around here?"

"Yeh. Travelin' with another chap—a guide I guess. Said they were huntin'. Didn't you know?"

The deputy sagged, and the men, exchanging glances between them, bundled him into a chair.

"Say, you stick right here," the leader urged. "You ain't fit to ride none tonight. Just be holdin' us up."

"Guess I better," Higbee agreed wearily. "I feel sort of—busted all over."

"We won't be gone long. You see which way Kemp lit out?"

The deputy nodded and looked into the anxious, hovering faces. Then he made a gesture toward the open door.

"East," he answered, his voice steady. "Saw him cross the clearing. He'll be making for the river."

"No chance of him gettin' far in that direction." The leader chuckled grimly. "We'll grab him sure."

Both men laughed as they bolted from the room.

Higbee listened to the shouting outside and heard the drum of departing hoofs. He sat quietly, content, smiling a little at the empty manacle that dangled by a file scarred chain from his wrist.

Imagination

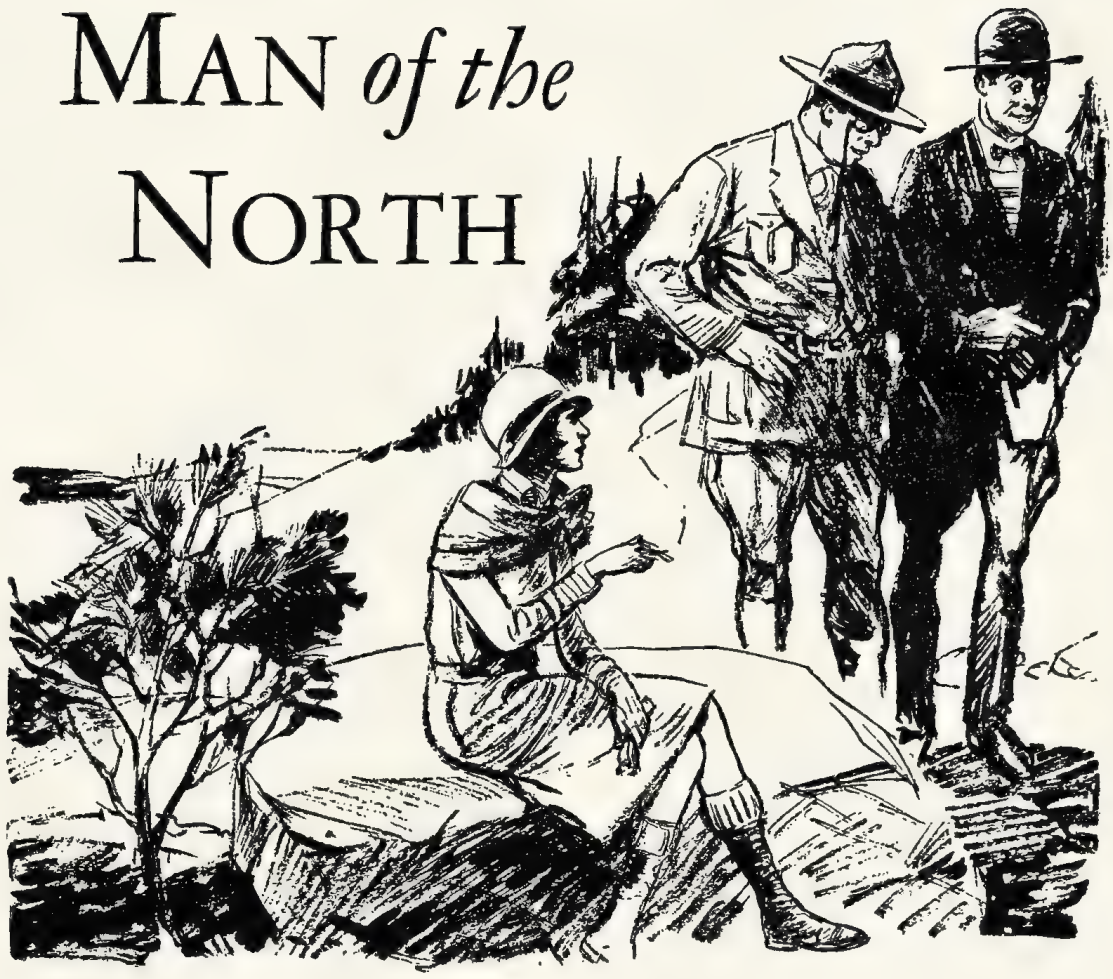
By HARRY KEMP

THERE'S a ship always sailing in my mind,
That rides forth with a great, invisible wind.
A ship that's tall, and glorious, and proud,
And wonderful as any sunset cloud.

It bears me on beyond each coast that mars
The open sweep and largeness of the sea;
Its prow cleaves oceans of reflected stars.
New stars rise, and the old stars cease to be
Where skies forever down immensity bend
Beyond horizons opening without end.

Concluding

MAN *of the* NORTH



A Novel of the White Waters of Canada

WHEN he left the North to go to college in Montreal, Brian O'Neill had no intention of becoming "civilized". He loved the North. His first love—Annette Beauleau—was of the North. He had found her in a remote cabin beyond Fort Chipewyan, with her father dying of an accidental bullet wound. He had slain a man named Colbert when Colbert had tried to force from Annette the secret—which she did not know—of her father's gold. He had killed a ruffian named Commer when Commer had attempted to rob Annette. In spite of his acknowledgment of his love for her, Annette had pleaded with Brian not to leave the North, not to leave her. Seth Adams, of the Government Survey, had lured Brian East, she thought, and he would never return. He would become a man of the cities.

On his way home from college Brian stopped in Edmonton. There, Sam Crane, an old time inspector of the Mounted, tricked Brian into a reunion with Annette. She was the cashier of the

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

hotel, and no longer of the North herself; she wore high heeled shoes and silk frocks. She did not forgive Brian for leaving her, simply to become a man of books, a scientist. They quarreled. Brian gave her back the money she had sent him anonymously when he was a student. He had worked his way through college—the most brilliant scientist it had ever graduated.

Bitter and resentful because fate had sent Annette—his ideal of the North—into civilization, Brian returned to Athabasca Landing and threw himself into the North; not the North of an explorer, but the North of a workman. He trapped furs, put up fish for the factor, even fished for the mission of Father Giroux. He cursed his education and the civilization which had cheated him, going and coming, of Annette Beauleau.

Sam Crane, of the Mounted, approved of Brian in his old haunts; but many people were disappointed in him. A college man putting up fish!

In the meantime a strange party—bound to the North—had stopped in the hotel in Edmonton where Annette was employed as cashier. Aristide Latrobe, Celeste Latrobe, his daughter, and a nondescript secretary named Bryce. Although Annette did not know it, Aristide Latrobe was the husband of her father's estranged sister. The sister had died and Latrobe was on his way to the cabin where Annette's father had died. He was a wily character who had spent much of his time at Monte Carlo. The girl Celeste was much too flashy and inquisitive to please Annette. But Annette did not know that they were her own relatives on the trail of the gold which her father had found, the gold which had brought Colbert to the cabin the day Brian had killed him.

Soon after the Latrobes had gone Sam Crane came into Edmonton with strange news for Annette. The Latrobes and Bryce had arrived at Fort Chipewyan and, Sam Crane said:

"When Brian got a look at that young woman it didn't take him no time to make up his mind to take the job o' guidin' 'em. He ducks in the store and comes out all rigged out in a new white jacket with a blue band around it, an' a blue scarf, an' a white cap with a blue tassel, an' new britches, an' boots. This girl, she's plum' up to date, too. She knows how to wear clothes—an' she can light a cigaret in the wind as handy as a man."

"And you say their name's Latrobe?" asked Annette.

"That's them!" exclaimed the inspector. "Do you know 'em?"

"I've met them," answered Annette

stiffly. And, turning abruptly, she flew up the stairs.

"You ought to be shot, Sam Crane," cried the Widow Carson with whom Annette lived.

"At sunrise," said Sam Crane. "I jest wanted she should know that last time I seen Brian he didn't have no mud on his boots!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE LATROBES HIRE A GUIDE

HARDLY had the Hudson's Bay Company steamer *Grahame* warped up at the Fort Chipewyan Landing, when Aristide Latrobe strode up to the huge red bearded man who stood upon the bank fumbling at a sheaf of invoices attached to a board by a clip.

"Can you direct me to the factor?" he asked.

" 'Tis mesel'," answered the man without looking up from his papers.

Latrobe looked perplexed.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What fer?" The man had not yet looked up from his invoices.

"I mean, my good man—ah—er—is the factor of Fort Chipewyan about?"

The old Scot looked up and with a jaundiced eye regarded the man who stood before him in Norfolk jacket, twilled riding breeches and high laced boots, fumbling uncertainly with the broad black ribbon of his pince-nez.

" 'Tis mesel', Angus Leith, that's factor here, as I told ye. Are ye goin' on wi' the boat?"

"No—that is—is there a man hereabouts by the name of Brian O'Neill?"

"Aye, an' lucky ye are to find um if ye're huntin' um. He'll be pullin' oot i' the mornin'."

"Where will I find him?"

From the boat some one shouted a number, and the red bearded man fumbled his papers.

"Can ye na' see I'm busy the noo, mon? An' ye ain't goin' on wi' the boat, yer business'll wait."

A silvery laugh caused Leith to look up quickly and behold a vision in tweeds at the elbow of the questioning one.

"Come on, papa. Can't you see the man is busy. Now that we know that this Mr. O'Neill is here, we can wait. I am sure Mr. Leith will talk to us later."

"Right ye are, lass!" assented Leith with a smile. " 'Twill na' be long the noo, an' I'll be wi' ye. Mak' yersel's to hame. 'Tis few visitors we ha', an' I welcome ye hearty!"

An hour later, as with a long drawn whistle the *Grahame* drew away from the Landing, Leith approached the three who stood surrounded by a sea of baggage.

"Ye said ye'd be wantin' to see Brian O'Neill?" he asked, by way of opening conversation.

"Er—yes. A matter of—ah—business. What sort of a person—"

The question was interrupted by the girl.

"Do you live here in winter, too, Mr. Leith? It must be fearfully cold!"

"Aye. 'Tis cauld at times. But, takin' it one year wi' anither, 'tis na' sae bad. Ye'll hae supper wi' me whilst I hae the Injuns git yer tents up. My wife's an Injun. 'Tis the way o' the country. White women are scarce—an' when all is said an' done, women's women."

"We would be delighted!" cried the girl. "But surely it is not time to think of supper."

"Aye, in an hour 'twill be time to eat. Ye've na' yet got used to our long Northern day."

As they proceeded from the river bank to the buildings the girl fell in beside Leith, who led the way.

"We were wondering," she said, "whether we could induce this Brian O'Neill to act as guide for us. We are not experienced wilderness travelers—not wilderness travelers, at all, I suppose. But we would like to see the wilderness and spend a month or more far away from civilization. I suppose that sounds silly to you, Mr. Leith, living here as you do—

but to us it means much. We heard that Mr. O'Neill knew the country—"

"Aye, lass! Le'me tell ye that Brian O'Neill knows more aboot the country than any mon that ever set fut in ut!"

"Do you think we can induce him to guide us? We will pay well."

"Weel, Brian's a queer fish, altogether. I'm na' sayin' he will, or he won't. 'Twill be as the notion strikes um. An' ye'd like to see um, ye'll hae time before supper. His tent's yonder beyont the teepees o' the Injuns. He laid up here a few days to mak' him some nets, but I mistrust he'll be finished the noo, an' ye'd better see him before he pulls oot."

BRIAN O'NEILL rose from his task of putting the finishing touches on a gill net stretched between two saplings to eye the trio who had come to a halt beside his little tent of green silk. The elder of the three advanced a step, fumbling nervously with the ribbon of his pince-nez.

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Brian O'Neill?" he asked.

Brian nodded.

"That's my name," he said.

"Ah—just so. We have come a long way to see you, and the factor informs us that we are very fortunate in finding you here." He paused and, as Brian made no comment, continued, "My name is Latrobe—Aristide Latrobe, of Quebec. My daughter, Miss Latrobe. And, Bryce, my secretary."

Brian acknowledged the introductions with a nod as Latrobe went on to explain:

"Our purpose in coming here is twofold. Primarily, it is on account of my daughter's health. Her physicians advised that she spend a summer in the open, and already your northern air has worked wonders for her. We could, of course, have obtained the same result much nearer home, but it so happens that my dear wife passed beyond a few weeks since, and it is in accordance with a solemn promise made to her upon her deathbed that we are here.

"She had a very dear brother who disappeared, and for years was given up for dead. Imagine, then, her surprise and delight when some five or six years ago she received a letter from him stating that he was living with his daughter somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Chipewyan. She wrote, begging him to visit us in Quebec, but never received a reply. The state of her health precluded any thought of her visiting him, nor did I care to absent myself from her side for so long a time.

"Toward the end she exacted a promise from me that after she had gone, I should journey to Fort Chipewyan and seek out this brother, and see if there was not something I could do for him, or for his daughter. In the event of his death, I was to search for his grave and arrange for a fitting tablet to be erected thereon.

"Inquiry in Edmonton developed the fact that he was indeed dead, that he met his death by means of an accidental gunshot wound, and that he had been buried near his cabin by one Brian O'Neill. Further inquiry revealed that you were in all probability in the vicinity of Fort Chipewyan, and so we came here in the hope of finding you and, if possible, persuading you to guide us to the grave of Jovin Beauleau. And also to obtain any information you may have concerning my poor brother-in-law. You knew him well, did you?"

"No. I never saw him till I found him wounded beside the river. His daughter was with him. She had built a signal fire in the hope of attracting the attention of some passing Indian."

Brian was surprised at the calm of his own voice. His brain was in a whirl. He remembered the words of Sam Crane, as the two had stood over the body of Colbert: "If she thinks he found gold, she ain't goin' to let this killin' stop her . . . we ain't heard the last of this, yet." His first impulse was to denounce the man for the liar he was. But—was it possible that the letter Jovin Beauleau had written to his sister contained some real information in regard to the gold? If so, could he

not, by pretending to play into the hands of these people, secure the gold for Annette? True, Annette was nothing to him—now. But, at least, he owed her this. Had she not continued to send him money all the time he was in college, when she believed he had gone out of her life forever? These people should be watched every moment they remained in the North . . .

Latrobe was speaking again—

"Will you—ah—engage to guide us to the grave of Jovin Beauleau?"

A bell sounded from the direction of the buildings.

"Supper's ready, if you're going to eat with Leith," said Brian. "I'll think it over. You can come back after supper."

"I don't believe Beauleau found any gold," muttered Brian to himself, when they had gone. "I panned every bar for miles and never got better than color. And yet—Colbert believed he did. And these people would never have come here from Quebec without mighty good reason to believe that the gold is here. It may be a pocket. Or it may be on some creek or river that I failed to find."

AS BRIAN finished his supper he looked up to see Celeste Latrobe standing beside the gill net.

"And you weave this yourself," she was saying, as her fingers trifled with the meshes. "How clever! You must show me how to do it sometime."

The rouged lips were smiling, and the large dark eyes were looking straight into Brian's.

"You don't mind my being here alone, do you? Papa and Bryce stopped to see that the things were properly placed in the tents, and I walked on ahead. You will take us to the place where poor Uncle Jovin lived, and show us his grave, won't you? It would be a terrible disappointment to come so far, and then have to go back without seeing it. And, after our promise to mama, and all—why, it would be tragic!"

"Yes," answered Brian. "I'll take you there. When do you want to start?"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. McNeill—"

"Not mister. And it's O'Neill, not Mac. My name is Brian."

"And mine is Celeste," laughed the girl, "and now that we are properly introduced, I know that we shall be great friends."

Feigning embarrassment, Brian mumbled an unintelligible answer, as he tossed his dishes into a pan in which water was heating on the coals.

"Here comes papa now," said the girl, "with Bryce at his heels as usual. Papa couldn't get along without Bryce. He calls him his secretary, but he's hardly more than a servant."

"I hope you have arrived at a decision favorable to us," said Latrobe.

"I'll go."

"Ah, that is indeed gratifying. And now about the matter of wage?"

"Ten dollars a day and my grub."

Latrobe hemmed and hawed. Brian shrugged.

"Take it or leave it," he said, and intercepted the meaning look that the girl flashed at her father.

"Now, papa," she was saying. "Don't be penurious. I am sure it is worth much more than that to us to keep our promise to poor dear mama."

"To be sure! To be sure!" assented Latrobe hastily. "We may consider the matter settled. When shall we start?"

"Whenever you're ready," answered Brian. "Have you ordered your supplies?"

"No. We are none of us experienced travelers in the wilderness. We shall need your advice in the matter of supplies."

"Might as well go over to the store and order them now. We'll be getting an early start in the morning."

"How long will it take us to reach our destination?" asked Latrobe, as they walked toward the store.

"That depends on a lot of things—the size of the outfit, for instance. How long do you expect to stay at Beauleau's cabin?"

"Well, I do not know, I'm sure. Two

or three weeks—a month—possibly longer. We expect to remain until my daughter has—er—completely recovered her health."

"We'll need seven Indians. I can hold up my end with the paddle, but none of you can. And it'll take four canoes to handle the outfit. We've got two portages, one of more than twenty miles, and one of about two. If the luck breaks right, we may make it in five or six days. But we've got about a hundred and twenty-five miles of paddling on the big lake where headwinds may hold us back for a week or more."

"Do you mean to say that we must entrust our lives to such a frail craft as a canoe?" exclaimed Bryce in a tone of such genuine terror that the others laughed.

"I'll go look up the canoes and the Indians," said Brian, as he finished checking over the supplies with Leith.

"Oh, let me go with you!" cried Celeste. "I love it—the romance of it," she said, as they walked toward the village of teepees. "Don't you love it, too? Or is it so much a part of your life that you do not notice?"

"I was born in the North," answered Brian. "It's my country."

WHY IS she playing up to me, he wondered, as they walked on in silence. There is something I know, or at least that she thinks I know, that she wants to find out. It is a game that two can play. I'd like to know, for instance, what was in that letter that makes these people believe that Jovin Beauleau found gold. Colbert was no fool. He would not have come up here on a mere rumor.

"You have not lived in the North all your life?" asked the girl. "Surely you have been to school? You do not talk like those others, the men on the boat."

"Oh, yes, I have been to school at the mission," boasted the man proudly. "I have a good education. I can read and write, and figure. And Father Giroux says I can speak English almost as well as he does. But French I do not know, and I do not want to know, for I have heard the French talk many times, and their talk is made up of words that sound foolish."

"I am French," laughed the girl.

"You can not help that," answered Brian magnanimously. "But you are educated, too. You do not have to use the French language. You speak the English almost as well as I do myself."

"Do you really think so?" cried the girl in mock delight. "It is good of you to say so anyway."

"I generally say what I think. And sometimes it will not sound so good. You do not look like you knew very much, and you will do many things wrong. But, if you listen to what I tell you, you will learn quickly."

" 'And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew, that one small head could carry all he knew,' " quoted the girl, and Bryan replied, seriously:

"There you are wrong. The size of the head makes no difference. The head of Father Giroux is no larger than mine, maybe a little smaller, and yet, about some things, he knows even more than I."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes. And there is the son of Joe Beechy who lives downriver. His head is as big as a water pail. He is more than twenty years old, and he does not even know his own name—but sits and plays all day with little sticks."

At the door of Amos Clawhammer's teepee, Brian called loudly and, when a few moments later the Indian appeared, he spoke rapidly to him in his own language. The Indian replied with a grunt of understanding, and the two turned toward the post.

"Your friend is not very talkative," ventured the girl.

"I, myself, said all that needed to be said," answered Brian complacently. "The canoes and the packers will be waiting for us in the morning.

As they approached the store they met Latrobe and Bryce walking toward the tents.

"We'll be stirring at four o'clock in the morning," warned Brian. "If this breeze holds we will make good time tomorrow."

Celeste addressed a pleasantry to Bryce, who frowned in return, as his glance rested for a moment upon Brian's clothing, the worn shirt of blue flannel, liberally and roughly patched with pieces of whatever cloth had come to hand, the faded blue denim overalls, and the worn moccasins. Brian, too, had intercepted the look, and as they approached the store, he glanced shyly at the girl.

"I think I shall buy some new clothes," he said. "Mine are nearly worn out."

"Oh, I think that would be splendid! Do let me help you select them. I saw a perfectly darling blanket coat in the store—white, with a broad blue band, and a cap to match."

"I will buy that one, if you like it," he answered, "and two shirts and some pants and a pair of boots. And you must buy some moccasins. Boots are no good in the canoes. They make holes in the bottom. Your father and that other one, must buy some, also. We can not be stopping to patch canoes."

When the purchases were made Brian stood in the doorway and watched the girl make her way to her tent. From the counter Leith combed at his red beard with his fingers, as he stared disapproval:

" 'Tis nae fittin' thing a woman should be smokin' cigarets," he rumbled. "I mak' nae doot she's a wild huzzy. An' ye'd do weel to gi' her wide berth, Brian O'Neill. Instead o' which ye'll be deckin' yersel' oot like Solomon in a' his glory."

"Oh, she's all right," smiled Brian. "I think she's beautiful, don't you?"

Leith's answer was a snort of contempt.

"Ye'll na' be the first mon, Brian O'Neill, to see his ruin i' a pretty face—nor the last. I watched her at supper, playin' wi' the mon, Bryce, like a cat wi' a mouse. Wi' a soft glance now, an' again a bold one, only to leave um wi' a look that cut like steel. Ye're a fool to let yon lass o' Beauleau's slip through yer fingers, an' tak' up wi' a hard eyed, cigaret smokin' wench like her. I'm ashamed o' ye, Brian O'Neill! I hae as gude an eye for a pretty face as ye hae, lad. An' I welcomed her at first. But I hae lived long eno' to know that a hard eye in a pretty face spells hell for ony mon!"

Gathering up his purchases, Brian made his way to his own tent, beyond the teepees of the Indians, and as he rolled between his blankets, he grinned broadly.

"What a fool she must think me," he muttered. "And Old Man Leith thinks so too. Well, the reputation of being a fool is my main asset—if I can play my string out."

CHAPTER XXVI

CELESTE PRODUCES THE SAMPLES

THE CANOES were already loaded with the supplies from the store when the Latrobes stepped from their tents. Brian, resplendent in his new outfit, conducted them to the fire, where the breakfast of bacon, fish, tea and bannocks awaited them.

He swaggered noticeably, as he issued a sharp command to the Indians, who began immediately to strike the tents. He approached Latrobe, who was doubtfully regarding his black tea.

"One tent's enough," he said crisply. "We don't need three. And we don't need a phonograph, nor that folding bathtub thing. And, instead of eight or nine big dufflebags, you can get along with one apiece."

"But, my good man," cried Latrobe, "we have brought along only that which we deemed necessary."

"You'll have to deem all over again, whatever that means," said Brian. "With the canoes pretty well loaded with grub, and a twenty mile portage ahead of us, every pound counts. If you think you know the country better than I do, you don't need me, and I'll quit right here—"

It was Celeste who interrupted.

"No, no, Brian! Of course we don't know the country. Whatever you say goes. I am sure papa will agree with me.

You wait just a minute till I finish my breakfast, and I'll help you sort the luggage."

As Brian acquiesced, he did not fail to note the look that flashed from the girl's eyes to the eyes of the two men. It was a "leave him to me" look, and also it was a look of supreme confidence.

The girl joined him a few moments later as he stood supervising the work of the Indians.

"About the tents, Brian," she said, flashing him a coy smile, "you know, we couldn't possibly get along with only one. Why—it would be unthinkable that I should not have a tent to myself! There is the matter of sleeping—but, aside from that—you told me I had much to learn—and there is much I want to learn—from you. There will be evenings, when the others are tired, that you and I will want to talk—"

With a swift glance of understanding Brian capitulated.

"Two tents, then—not three," he said.

"Now, the phonograph," she began. "Don't you think that if we are to be in the wilderness for several weeks, possibly several months, that a phonograph would add greatly to our enjoyment? We brought some wonderful records. Don't you like music?"

"Sure I do. When Sister Agatha at the mission plays the hymns on the organ; and when old Dolph Labrie plays on his fiddle, then every one has to dance."

"But we have music here with us that is much better than either Sister Agatha's organ, or Dolph Labrie's fiddle—"

"How do you know?" asked Brian sharply. "You have not heard Sister Agatha, and you have not heard Dolph Labrie."

"Listen, Brian," said the girl, laying her hand confidentially on his arm. "The very best musicians in the world play and sing to make the records. I don't think any one else in the North would understand this—but you will, because you are educated. Surely you know that there are better musicians than those you have mentioned, and if there are, you owe it to yourself to hear them. Music is as much a part of one's education as figures, or reading or writing."

"All right," he said. "We'll take the phonograph and the records. But we won't pack any bathtubs. And you'll have to leave more than half your duffle."

"The bathtub was father's idea. For my part, I much prefer a dip in a lake."

Despite the protests of the men, the luggage was reduced by half, the girl siding with Brian over each disputed article. With everything finally stowed, Celeste took her place facing Brian, who was paddling the stern of the leading canoe. Bryce looked daggers as he climbed into another canoe between two Indians, and the girl smiled.

"Brian has promised to educate me in the ways of the North," she explained sweetly.

"And I daresay that in the process his own education will increase by leaps and bounds," commented Bryce dryly. He added, sarcastically, "I already note a marvelous advance in the matter of apparel."

"We must all live and learn," smiled the girl. "Who knows but that even you may get something worth while out of this trip?"

As they shoved off Sam Crane beached his canoe at the landing.

"Hello, Brian!" he called. "I'm goin' on upriver. Got any word you want to send outside?"

"No, I don't think there's anything to be said," he answered, and with a dip of his paddle, he headed the canoe out into the lake, as Celeste lighted a cigaret and settled back among the luggage.

AT THE first night's camp, Celeste and Brian sat long over the camp-fire after the others had retired.

"Don't you ever put up your tent?" asked the girl, her eyes on Brian's bedroll that lay upon the shingle near the canoes.

"Only when it rains," he answered. "Why bother with a tent?"

"But suppose some animal should happen along?"

"What animal, for instance?"

"Why, a—a bear!"

"They often do," laughed Brian. "They just sniff and pass on. Why do people stick to the idea that wild animals are dangerous? There is no place in the North, now—nor ever was—when a man can't crawl between his blankets and be as safe from wild animals as though he were locked in any house in the world. Protect yourself from the black flies and mosquitoes, and you can laugh at the rest of the animals."

"I suppose one would get used to it," shuddered the girl. "But just being out in the wild country makes one imagine that all sorts of things could come stalking out of the dark. What's that?" she cried suddenly, moving closer as her hand gripped Brian's knee.

"Barred owl," he grinned. "Pretty soon you'll hear an answer."

"How could a person ever get used to it?" she said. "Even with you here, I'm petrified with terror."

"Lots of them do get used to it," answered Brian. "And when they know the North, they love it."

"I suppose poor Uncle Jovin's daughter knew the North," said the girl. "Tell me about her. Did she live here always? And what has become of her since Uncle Jovin died?"

Brian shrugged.

"Who can tell what has become of her? She went outside after the death of her father. The world is large."

"Outside? Where is outside?"

"Why—all the rest of the world. When people leave the North they go outside."

"You knew her very well—this girl—my cousin?"

"No," answered Brian, staring moodily into the fire. "I did not know her—well."

"Ah—a shattered romance!" laughed the girl. "Come, Brian, tell me about her. Is she beautiful?"

"It is years since she left the North. She was beautiful then—more beautiful, even, than you. And I think you are beautiful—"

"Thank you."

"Why do you thank me? I have nothing to do with your beauty."

"Thank you for mentioning it. It is a compliment."

"One does not need to be thanked for telling the truth."

"What delightful naïveté! And you say this girl was more beautiful than I?"

"Oh, yes. She was much more beautiful."

"What did my Uncle Jovin do for a living?" asked the girl abruptly.

"Oh, fished and trapped, I suppose. That is what people do in the North."

"Did he dig gold?"

"Gold? He said something about gold before he died. He could not speak very well. It was in the throat—his wound. He wanted a pencil and paper, but when Annette brought it he was dead."

"Annette?"

"Yes, that was her name—Annette. I think it is a pretty name. I think your name is pretty, too. But I like Annette better."

"And he couldn't tell you anything about this gold?"

"No. I do not think he found any gold. Many old men who have prospected all their lives think they have found gold. But only a very few of them do find it. He did not have any gold. Annette said that he told her he had found gold. But she never saw any. And, after he died, I panned the gravel and the sand on many creeks near his cabin. But I never found any gold, either. I think he was crazy. Old men get that way—when they have sought too long for gold. I was sorry I could not find the gold. I think Annette needed it."

"Would you have given it to her if you had found it?" asked the girl, her eyes on Brian's face.

"Why, yes—of course. It would be her father's gold. If you should find your uncle's gold, would you not give it to Annette?"

Celeste Latrobe laughed.

"Indeed I wouldn't! Even if I knew where to find her! If she thought her father found gold why didn't she stay here and search for it? The records show that Jovin Beauleau never filed any gold claim—"

"The records—"

"I mean," floundered the girl, "that if Uncle Jovin had found any gold, and had filed a claim, it would be a matter of record."

"And you examined these records to see? You believe, then, that Jovin Beauleau found gold?"

Celeste was furious. She realized that she had played her game so clumsily that even the suspicions of this boorish outlander were aroused. She hastened to cover, assuming an air of sadness:

"In Uncle Jovin's letter to my poor dear mother, he mentioned something about gold. As papa told you, this letter was written five or six years ago. So, when we promised mama we would look him up we stopped in Edmonton and examined all available records. Why, it was in the records of the police that we learned that he was dead, and that you had buried him. That is why we hunted you up at Fort Chipewyan. We do not care about the gold. We have so much money, now, that we do not know what to do with it. It was only to find poor dear Uncle Jovin that we came—to see if we could not do something to help him. And, now that he is dead, if we could find his daughter—"

Brian shook his head slowly.

"Annette," he said, "has gone out of the North."

A southeaster, coming up about noon the following day, held them shorebound for a week. With consummate ingenuity Celeste avoided Brian, and the evenings were spent listening to the phonograph. During the day, while Brian and the Indians hunted or fished, the girl roamed the beach with Bryce, or played cribbage with Latrobe.

Black Bay was finally reached, and the work of portaging the four canoes and three tons of outfit took two days more. Other delays followed, and it was on the seventeenth day after leaving Fort Chipewyan that the outfit arrived at the cabin of Jovin Beauleau.

THE INDIANS were paid off and dismissed, and the four set to work putting the cabin into habitable shape. The girl elected to sleep in the cabin. A tent was set up for Latrobe and Bryce, and Brian pitched his own small tent a short distance away. In the evening he showed them the graves of Jovin Beauleau and his wife, on the little plateau beside the banksian grove on the bluff overlooking the river; and Latrobe waxed eloquent in promising that a fitting tablet should be erected to mark these lonely graves.

Two weeks passed with Celeste dividing her time impartially between Brian and Bryce. She helped set fish nets, and panned the bars and the beds of creeks for gold, and, with Bryce, she took long walks in the hills.

Latrobe was wont to disappear each morning after breakfast, and several times Brian came upon him during the day, wandering aimlessly among the ridges chipping at rocks with a small pick. So Latrobe believed it was quartz gold that Jovin Beauleau had found? At least, he was wasting no time with a shovel and pan in the creek beds. Thereafter, for several days, Brian himself explored ridges, but, as he expected, he found only quartzite schists, hematite, and here and there quantities of quartz pebbles imbedded in a conglomerate with a matrix of limonite. He grinned to himself. Latrobe would be welcome to all the gold he would get out of that formation.

One day, as Brian was preparing to set a gill net, Celeste called to him from the cabin. Latrobe and Bryce were off somewhere in the hills and, as he appeared at the door, the girl invited him to enter.

"Come in and have a cup of tea, and some of this good cheese. I brought it clear from Edmonton."

"I ought to get the net out. We have no more fish."

"Oh, bother the net! I'll help you with that later. And, besides, I want to talk."

"It is always more pleasant to talk than to work," said Brian, "especially when one may talk with so beautiful a lady."

"You're improving," laughed Celeste. "You'll be a lady killer, yet, Brian. That was really quite a nice speech."

"One says what one thinks."

"Until I met you I wouldn't have believed any one did," answered the girl seriously. "You don't take sugar, do you?"

"No. That is a bad habit. Sugar is just one more thing to carry, if you are traveling light. This tea is very weak. You can see the bottom of the cup."

"Try this cheese," she smiled. "I think you will find that strong enough." She removed the cover from a round wooden box of Camembert and passed a plate of crackers.

"This cheese has spoiled!" cried Brian. "We must throw it away."

"Oh, no. That's the way it is supposed to be."

"I think I will have a bannock. I do not like rotten things."

The girl laughed.

"There is no accounting for tastes, I suppose. You like strong tea, and mild cheese, and I like weak tea and strong cheese."

"I could not eat a thing that stinks," answered Brian. "I have seen Indians eat rotten fish."

The girl answered with an audible sniff:

"I'd almost as lief eat rotten ones as fresh ones," she said. "I've gotten so I hate the thought of fish—and of almost everything else one has to eat up here. The truth is, Brian, I'm completely fed up on this wild country stuff. I want to go back where one can at least enjoy the comforts of civilization."

"When you have recovered your health, your father will probably take you back," ventured Brian.

"My health!" said the girl angrily. "Do you mean to tell me that you really believed that bunk about my health? Well, let me tell you that the only thing that's worrying papa is the fact that he hasn't been able to find Uncle Jovin's gold."

"If he really believes that Jovin Beauleau found gold, why does he not hunt for it in the creek beds, then, instead of wasting his time among the ridges?"

Celeste lowered her voice and leaned toward him.

"Listen, Brian," she said confidentially. "We *know* Uncle Jovin found gold! I feel as though I knew you well enough, now, to talk as one friend to another. You are a friend of mine, aren't you, Brian?"

"One should feel honored to have such a beautiful lady for his friend," he said gravely.

"That's twice within a half hour you have told me I am beautiful," laughed the girl. "You are developing rapidly. And I love to have you tell me that, Brian—because I know you mean what you say. And, who knows, if we should find gold—" Brian felt his face flush as the dark eyes seemed to devour him in the warmth of their glance. "Because," she was saying, "if we do find it, it will be share and share alike for the four of us."

"But—there is Annette," reminded Brian.

The girl's eyes narrowed.

"We can leave her out of it," she said. "You yourself told me she had gone out of the North. If she believed her father had found gold why didn't she stay here and hunt for it? We know the gold is here, but I don't think that papa and that fool Bryce can find it if they search a hundred years. If any one can find it, you can."

Brian shook his head.

"No, I panned the creeks for many miles. I did not find any gold."

For answer the girl rose and, crossing to a dufflebag, produced a box from which she dumped three small rock fragments to the table.

"Did you ever see any rock like that in this country?" she asked.

One by one Brian picked up the fragments, studied them minutely, and returned them to the table. Slowly he shook his head.

"No, I do not think I have seen such rocks here. But what have these rocks to do with any gold?"

"The gold is in the rocks—"

Brian smiled, as he would have smiled at a child.

"No, no," he interrupted. "Gold is found in the sand and the gravel of creeks. Rocks are not gold. If these are what Beauleau found, I think your father and Bryce are wasting their time."

"Maybe they are," said the girl. "But, at least, rock like this is what they are hunting for. I am sick and tired of this country, and I want to get out of it. Do this for me, Brian—please. Find the place where these pieces of rock came from. Whether they contain gold, or not—at least, papa thinks they do. It is what he is searching for, and when it is found he will be satisfied. We will each stake out a claim, and then I can leave this godforsaken country forever!"

"And then I will not see you any more," answered Brian seriously.

Once again the dark eyes were upon him, seemed to encompass him in an all devouring gaze.

"Who knows, Brian?" she said, softly. "Perhaps we will go out together. When you have seen something of the world, you will never want to come back to—this."

"I will find the rocks," he said gravely. "And now shall we set the net?"

That night Brian smiled into the coals of his little fire.

"High grade galena," he breathed. "And heavy with gold. No wonder I couldn't find Beauleau's strike, back in the days when I thought all gold was found by pan washing. That stuff must have come from the northward, toward the height of land. Probably a dyke running transverse to the quartzite ridges. I'll find it—and the Latrobes can stake their claims!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LOST MINE

FOR SEVERAL days Brian prospected the ridges to the northward, and succeeded, here and there, in locating shallow shafts and drifts that had evidently been sunk years before by Jovin Beauleau. These showed only iron and copper pyrites of little or no value, but their position did show that the trend of Beauleau's workings had been to the northeastward from the cabin. From his wanderings of the previous summer he knew that beyond the height of land lay a broad area of granite formation devoid of other mineral.

Brian smiled as he sat upon the edge of the shallow shaft and ate his luncheon of bannocks and smoked fish. Once again, and probably for the last time, he was the trained scientist. He would summon the knowledge he had gained during his four years of grueling work, and he would find the spot where Beauleau had unearthed his vein of galena. He would stake a claim, file it at McMurray, record an assignment and mail it to Annette in Edmonton—and then, well, maybe Leith would give him a job putting up fish in the fall. Or maybe he would hunt up Sam Crane and join on with the police.

His thoughts turned to the Latrobes.

"The damned crooks!" he muttered. "They haven't got one decent idea between them! But—I'll give them one more chance. If Beauleau's galena vein is big enough to support several claims, and at the last minute they show a willingness to do the square thing by Annette, I'll let them in. But they won't. I'm going to enjoy telling them a few things when I refuse their pay at McMurray."

Filling his pipe, Brian considered his problem. He reasoned that to the northeastward the height of land could not be farther than twelve or fifteen miles from where he sat. If Beauleau had continued to work toward the northeastward, what more natural than that he had made his strike well toward the northerly edge

of the Huronian and Keewatin rocks, where they gave place to the non-mineral granite of the barren grounds?

Striking a compass course, he proceeded some three miles and ascended a ridge where he soon located another of Beauleau's shafts—a deeper one this time, that followed a crystalline outcrop of augite. By means of two stunted trees lashed together he lowered himself into the fifteen foot hole and carefully examined the sides and the bottom with his flashlight. The augite altered abruptly to chlorite quartz, and in a fissure of the chlorite he discovered a narrow vein of the gold bearing galena.

A hurried examination satisfied him that the vein pinched out at no great distance down. That Beauleau himself had believed this, was evidenced by the fact that he had abandoned the shaft. But the veriest fool could see that the vein was in fact the galena of the samples, and to Latrobe and Bryce, who knew nothing of dips and pinchouts, this shaft might well be the enormously valuable mine that they sought. To add to the illusion a large slab of the ore bearing rock evidently dislodged from above lay on the bottom of the shaft giving the effect at first glance of a solid floor of rock in place.

Brian climbed from the hole, cursing himself for not having wormed from the girl something of the contents of the letter that had sent first Colbert and now the Latrobes into the North. He knew that the letter had divulged nothing of the location of the strike, but it certainly must have mentioned something of its value, or its extent. Beauleau, Brian now realized, knew rocks; and no man who knew rocks would try to finance so palpable a pinchout as this narrow vein at the bottom of the shaft.

Curbing his growing excitement, Brian struck out on his course. One other shaft he found a few miles away, which showed no trace of galena. Then, well toward evening, he came upon a drift that slanted into a low, broad ridge that paralleled two higher ones. Flashlight in hand, he stooped to enter the low mouth of the drift, and immediately froze in his tracks, his heart racing wildly. Not ten feet in front of him the whole face of the drift showed solid galena!

Upon the floor were bushels and tons of fragments. With fingers that trembled, Brian compared the fragments with the one he had brought from the cabin. They were the same—hundreds of thousands—millions of tons of high grade ore. And what a location! He withdrew from the drift, and for long minutes his gaze fixed upon the river that rushed noisily northward in a series of low falls and rapids—unlimited ore! Unlimited waterpower! And all Annette's!

HE SAT down, and for a long, long time, as the northern twilight deepened, stared at the foaming river.

"It's a great world," he muttered cynically. "The education that she despised has made her rich beyond her wildest dreams. While to me—who wanted it—who worked so hard to get it—it is nothing. She, who was so intrinsically of the North as to seem a part of the North, has gone out of the North. And I, who fitted myself to take my place in the world of men who use their brains, am putting up fish for Leith! Oh, well . . . to hell with it!"

Brian ate the rest of his smoked fish, built a fire in a sheltered spot and lay down for a few hours' sleep. In the morning he jerked a fish from a pool in the river, roasted it, and proceeded to lay out and stake a claim. He set his stakes, marked them and, entering the drift, put a hundred pounds or so of the rock fragments into his pack sack and proceeded to the shaft, some ten miles distant, where he had found the narrow pinchout of galena. Dumping the fragments into the shaft, he returned for another load. And it was late in the afternoon that he pursued a roundabout course for the cabin.

"That guide is getting more worthless every day," growled Latrobe, as he removed the little box containing the

samples from the dufflebag. "It was seven o'clock last evening before we had supper, and it is nearly that, now—and he hasn't showed up yet. What has he been doing these last few days? And—look here, Celeste! One of these samples is gone!"

The girl smiled sweetly into the irate face.

"Yes, papa, Brian has it in his pocket.'

"In his pocket! Do you mean that you have showed him the samples?"

"Why not? You and Bryce don't seem to have scored any very conspicuous success in locating Uncle Jovin's mine. I thought it was time to let somebody search for it who knew the country at least well enough to go out of sight of the cabin without fear of getting lost. I'm sick and tired of living like an Indian, and I want to go home. I told Brian several days ago just what we were up here for, that my ill health was all bunk, and so was your touching speech over Uncle Jovin's grave. I think he was a little shocked at first, but you know as well as I do that I can twist him around my finger. I knew I could make use of him sometime. And I have rather cultivated him to that end."

"And rather enjoyed yourself doing it, after dressing him up like a pop in jay," said Bryce surlily from the doorway.

"Immensely! I should have been bored to extinction without him!"

"What did he say," asked Latrobe, "when you told him that sample contained gold?"

"He doesn't believe it. He said that gold comes from the sand and the gravel of creeks, not from rocks. I told him that you and Bryce thought the rock contained gold, and that it was what you were hunting for, and that if he could find rocks like the sample we would each stake a claim and get out of this country. He promised to find the rock, but said that if you and Bryce thought that stuff was gold, you were wasting your time."

Latrobe shook his head doubtfully.

"It is a matter upon which you should have consulted me. If he is the fool you think he is, you have doubtless done wisely. I myself think that he can find the stuff sooner than either Bryce or I. But suppose he should believe that the stuff is gold and should stake out a claim, and—"

Bryce caught the drift of the older man's thought, and interrupted with an exclamation of terror:

"And go out and file and leave us here! We could never find our way out! Could never handle the canoes on the big lake if we did. Why, we'd—we'd starve to death!"

"Not I," answered the girl sweetly. "You forget that I have learned how to set nets. And you may rest assured that Brian would never go away and leave me. I have attended to that. He's such a dear boy, Bryce. You should know him better."

WHEN an hour passed and still Brian had not appeared, Celeste made tea, and the three dined in silence upon smoked fish and bannocks.

Morning came, and still no Brian. Again Celeste made tea, and Bryce sarcastically remarked, as he ate the badly scorched tinned peas that were set before him, that it was too bad Celeste had not learned to cook fish as well as to catch them. She replied that she would agree to cook all that he could dress, and the meal ended with Latrobe roundly berating her for taking the guide into confidence.

After the men had left the cabin Celeste settled herself to read but, after an hour, during which her mind wandered a dozen times from the printed page, she tossed the book from her and wandered aimlessly about. What was keeping Brian? Never before had he remained away from the camp at night. Could it be possible that her father was right—that Brian was not the fool she thought him? That he had located the Beauleau mine and was even now hastening to record it? What was it he had said about this girl, Annette, Beauleau's daughter? That she should be allowed to share in the

mine? A look of anger flashed into the dark eyes as Celeste recollected the episode of the cashier's cage. She had not the slightest doubt in the world that this girl was Beauleau's daughter—her own cousin. But did Brian O'Neill know where she was? No! The lout had never been out of the North. And he had said he had not known this Annette very well.

Manifestly, if he had known of her whereabouts he would have boasted of it, as he had boasted of his mission education and his ability as a guide. And he had dismissed this girl with the mere statement that she had gone out of the North. Well, Annette Beauleau would never profit by her father's mine if she could help it. Once the claims were safely filed she would take the keenest delight in flaunting the fact in the girl's teeth! Impudent piece! She'd teach her to insult her betters! Cashier in a hotel! When the mine was upon a paying basis, she would make it a point to maintain an expensive suite of rooms in that very hotel. She would show her . . .

At noon Celeste drank tea and finished the last of her crackers and Camembert. Later she descended the trail to the river and, remembering Bryce's taunt, and her own boast, stepped into the canoe and pushed out to the first net stake. Gingerly she lifted a corner of the net and, after one or two failures, succeeded in lifting a whitefish into the canoe. Putting back to shore, she procured a knife from the cabin and, when the fish ceased flopping, she managed after a fashion to remove its head and entrails. She carried it to the cabin, built up a hot fire and, placing a frying pan on the stove, laid the fish therein. There was a great spluttering, and a thousand tiny explosions as smoke filled the room with the odor of burning fish. She essayed to turn it, but it stuck to the pan, and after much effort she succeeded in tearing it apart, only to be greeted by fresh volumes of smoke. In desperation she jerked the pan from the stove and carried it hurriedly out the door—to be greeted by Brian O'Neill.

SO GREAT was her relief at seeing him that she took no offense at the grin with which he was regarding her culinary effort.

"Where in the world have you been?" she cried.

"Out in the hills," he answered, with a sweep of the arm that included half the horizon.

He took the pan from her hand and stared at the mass of scorched scales, raw meat and patches of skin burned to a charcoal. She flushed slightly.

"I was trying to cook a fish," she explained. "Bryce intimated that I didn't know how."

"This is probably a new way," answered Brian.

"It's the way I've seen you do it a dozen times."

"Partly," he admitted. "But maybe you weren't looking when I took the scales off and put grease in the pan."

"I don't know anything about scales," she exclaimed rather testily. "And I thought, of course, fish had its own grease—like bacon. I don't care, anyway. I wasn't educated to be a cook."

"A little of it wouldn't hurt," said Brian. "There are times it might come handy. I'll show you, if you like."

"Thanks. I'll let you do the cooking. But you had better have a good dinner tonight. Papa and Bryce are furious. But you haven't told me yet where you've been, and what kept you so long?"

"Oh, I've been up and down the ridges, hunting the place where Beauleau got those rocks. Found it, too. I was pretty tired last night, so I just camped where I was."

"You found it!" cried the girl, rushing up and laying her hand on his arm.

Brian saw that the eyes that stared into his blazed with excitement.

"Yes, I found it, all right. It's a deep hole, down in the rocks. But, there is no gold there—only rocks like these. And rocks are not gold."

As he spoke he swung the packsack from his shoulders and, reaching into it, tossed a handful of samples on to the table.

Instantly the girl dived into the duffle-bag and, procuring the samples, compared them meticulously.

"Oh, they're the same! Just exactly the same!" she cried.

She stepped outside for better light, just as Latrobe appeared around the corner of the banksian grove. The girl returned the fragments to the table and, as Latrobe entered the cabin, she motioned toward them with a great show of indifference.

"Brian has found Uncle Jovin's mine," she said. "I knew, of course, he would do it when he found out what we were hunting for."

Latrobe looked up from the fragments.

"Where did you find these?" he asked.

"I took them from the bottom of a hole in some rocks."

"But how did you locate the hole?"

"That was easy. A few days ago Celeste showed me the small pieces of rock and she said they were gold. You may think those rocks are gold. I have seen gold. It is yellow, and it comes from creeks and from rivers, not from rocks. I told her that, but she said that you believed these rocks to be gold, and that you wanted to find them. I knew that if Beauleau had dug up these rocks, he must have got them from some ridge. I also knew that one can not dig in rocks, and not leave plenty of sign that he has dug. So I hunted the ridges, and when I found the hole, I climbed down into it and found the broken pieces of rock, and also the rocks from which they were broken."

"Is it far from here?"

"It is only a few miles."

"You have done well, my boy!" cried Latrobe. "Tomorrow we will stake our claims! And after that—back to civilization, and to the opulence that is the reward of work well done. You may not think that this rock contains gold—but, we, who are wiser, know that it does—millions of dollars' worth of gold. And to show you our appreciation of your part in the enterprise, I shall allow you to stake a claim for yourself!"

"That is kind of you," said Brian. "I will stake a claim if it will please you. But I do not think it will be any good. There is a thing that I was thinking, though, as I walked back today. You seem to be good people, in your way. You do not know much, but that one can not help. I was thinking that if you believe this rock to be gold, you should file, also, a claim for Annette Beauleau. It was her father who found the rocks and, if they are of value, she should be allowed to have a part of the money. She has been gone from the North for many years, but I should think that there would be a way that you could find her. She did not have much money when she left the North. She was very poor, I think. It may be that somewhere she is now in need of this money that she might receive from her father's mine."

Celeste laughed nastily.

"Listen, Brian," she said, "we feel quite competent to manage our family affairs without your suggestions. As I told you before, if this Annette Beauleau believed her father had found gold, she should have stayed here and found it. She repudiated her own father's judgment by leaving the country. She has made her bed, now let her lie in it. Now, let us hear no more of Annette Beauleau!"

"Quite so! Quite so!" assented Latrobe.

"Very well," answered Brian. "I thought that, maybe, you would like the chance to help her. I will say no more."

NEXT morning the four set out from the cabin with packs upon their backs. Brian explained that at least a full day would be required to reach the shaft, set all the stakes and properly mark them, and it was decided that both time and labor would be saved by camping for the night at the shaft.

It was a roundabout way that he led, a trail that more than doubled the actual distance from the cabin to the shaft. He had no wish to be asked to explain why he had elected to camp in the open rather than walk the scant half dozen

miles to a hot supper and a warm bed. Nor had he any wish that either Latrobe or Bryce should feel inclined to give the shaft more than a cursory examination which would show a goodly scattering of fragments that had evidently been chipped from the floor of solid galena.

He felt sure that neither knew anything of rock, that they had made this journey to find exactly what he would show them—a shaft whose rock matched up with the samples they had brought with them. Tired men are less inclined to carry on a thorough investigation than are men who are physically fresh; therefore the route Brian selected necessitated the traverse of a half mile or more of particularly dense black spruce swamp, the fording of a shallow fast river, the skirting of a broad and mucky muskeg and the surmounting of innumerable ridges.

In the lead Brian grinned to himself as the men behind him sweated and cursed and grumbled. In the rear Celeste plodded on in tight lipped silence. Twice he dropped back to help her—once in fording the river, and again to lift the pack from her shoulders at the edge of the muskeg and add it to his own, already twice the size of either of the others.

"Men are satisfied when they think they've found what they want to find," he muttered to himself, as he regained the lead. "Women are satisfied—never. She's smarter than they are. She'll be less dangerous if she still thinks she's got me where she wants me. Only a little longer—and then—to hell with them!"

It was nearly noon when the shaft was reached. After a hasty luncheon Latrobe expressed his impatience to explore the property. Slipping his flashlight into his pocket, Brian lowered himself into the hole and steadied the improvised ladder while the older man followed. Flashing his light over the rough walls, Brian brought it to focus upon the narrow vein of galena that showed in the chlorite fissure. "It is the same," assented Latrobe judicially. "But it is not of the extent I had hoped to find."

For answer Brian laughed shortly, and abruptly turned his light downward. For what seemed a full minute Latrobe stood staring wide eyed at what appeared to be a solid floor of galena, strewn liberally with chipped fragments. Then a cry escaped him that rang loudly in the ears of the two who knelt above and stared downward into the pit.

"My God! The whole ridge is solid ore! Come! Out of this! We must stake the claims, and then lose no time in recording them! Come, hurry, can't you?" he rasped at Brian. "Suppose some one else should come and then beat us to the recorder!"

Brian grinned.

"I guess there's no one going to do that," he said, "seeing that it's laid here all these years. And I don't figure you'd lose anything if they did. Gold is found in creeks—"

"For heaven's sake, shut up, you ignorant fool! And let's get out of here," cried the man, losing his temper completely under stress of excitement. "I don't want to hear any more of your insane mumbling about creeks. Any fool ought to know that for every pound of gold taken from creeks, there is a ton taken from mountains."

Brian grinned broadly as he pushed and shoved and boosted to get the irate man out of the shaft.

"You are the fool," he heard the girl whisper, as the man's head reached the level of her own. "Don't you realize that if you should offend him he could pull out and leave us here? Then where would be the good of your mountain of gold? Leave him to me."

AN HOUR was spent on the surface, with Celeste and Bryce and Latrobe going over the ground with a tape they had brought for the purpose. Brian set up the tent and cut spruce boughs for the beds. He emerged from spreading the boughs to see the girl and Latrobe approaching.

"Papa and I have been talking it over, Brian," she began, "and we have decided that, since you are the one who

really found the mine, you should be allowed to stake the choicest claim."

"Quite true, quite true," assented the man. "And also, to show you, my good man, that I—er—meant nothing by my—ah—rather hasty utterance of a short time ago. It was induced, doubtless, by the—ah—rather excited state of my—er—feelings, upon finding that for which we have so long sought. I may, I believe, without seeming to—ah—boast, state that I am a geologist of no mean ability. I am, in fact, considered to stand very high in my—er—profession. By a series of calculations based upon certain measurements we have just completed, I have determined that the vein of ore widens as it approaches the southerly side of the ridge. You will note that the character of the surface rock changes, and this shows that what is known as the —er—substratum, or lower rock, which we now know to be ore of immense value, must widen and thicken immensely."

Brian glanced toward the indicated area and saw that the crystalline augite and chlorite had given place to an amygdaloidal mass enclosing calc-spar, which within a few feet gave place to a greenish malachite that showed copper stains. Latrobe continued:

"We have therefore concluded to allow you to stake the more southerly claim, while we shall rest content with the three adjoining claims which include the shaft and the surrounding property."

These latter areas Brian noted showed on the surface the same augite and chlorite quartz that had composed the walls of the shaft.

"Thank you, sir!" he said. "Some day I will show you how much I appreciate your kindness. It is wonderful to me how you can know these things with only a tape line to go by. And it will be more wonderful, still, to find out that we have found a valuable mine on this ridge."

"Ah—yes. Doubtless wonderful to a poor guide, but to a man of—er—science, the most natural thing in the world, my lad. And, now, if you will fall to with the ax, we will place our location stakes and properly mark them. I have here a copy of the mining laws pertaining to quartz mining claims, and you and Bryce may place the stakes as I direct."

That night over the huge camp-fire that was built to celebrate the staking of the claims, the Latrobes and Bryce spent millions, gloating openly over the dead Jovin Beauleau, of whom they spoke slightingly and with sneers. And, upon more than one occasion, in the exuberance of her new wealth, Celeste spoke slurringly of Annette, so that Brian, smiling unheeded beside the fire, wondered whether, indeed, the two had not met.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANNETTE GOES NORTH

FOR HOURS after Inspector Sam Crane's departure from the Widow Carson's, Annette Beauleau lay fully dressed upon her bed and stared up at the ceiling where the street light threw an ever changing pattern of leaves from the tree outside her window.

She tried to think coherently—to analyze in the light of cold reason this thing that was hurting her so. Why should she care that Brian O'Neill was at this very moment somewhere in the North acting as guide to the Latrobes? Brian O'Neill was nothing to her. He had gone into the North and, as is the way of those in the North, he must earn his living—trapping, putting up fish, guiding—even as she herself was making her living after the manner of those who live in cities. She hated the Latrobes—Celeste Latrobe, the aristocratic, arrogant young woman who had demanded to know the name of her father.

"Arrogant, aristocratic, if you will," whispered a little torturing devil in her ear, "but also beautiful—and attractive."

"Her eyes are hard," Annette found herself answering aloud.

"But," retaliated the little torturing devil, "her legs are silken and slender, her lips are red, and her eyes can glow with Madonna-like softness—upon one she loves."

"She couldn't love! She would play with him, kill him, ruin him, and turn him away with a laugh!"

Annette sat suddenly upright, staring wide eyed, speaking aloud, realizing her words, yet realizing they were spoken in the half-delirium of dreamland.

She glanced at her wristwatch, holding it at an angle that would catch the slanting beams from the street light. It was two o'clock. She leaped to her feet, snapped on the light, drew down the shades and stepped out of her gown—an exquisitely made thing of pale blue crêpe. For an instant she faced herself in the glass.

"What do I care?" she muttered. "What is Brian O'Neill to me?"

"Whose eyes are hard now?" came faintly, as from afar, the whispering voice of the little torturing devil. "But your legs are as slender and as silken as hers." With a start she turned abruptly from the glass.

"He's everything in the world to me!" she cried with a dry sob. "And—and—if—if I have ruined both our lives—I . . ." Words failed.

She threw herself into a deep chair as with clean cut and vivid distinctness, thoughts of Brian O'Neill crowded her brain. It was as if she sat in a theater and watched the drama of Brian's life and her own pass on a screen before her. Tense, almost rigid she sat, as the highlights of these two lives unfolded before her—impersonal, logical, yet fraught with the most absorbing interest. Always, it dawned upon her, Brian had acted the man, loving her, adoring her, yet always pushing ahead, doing the thing that was the right thing, unyielding as iron—unyielding for the right. Under the strange spell of the unfolding drama, she found herself hating herself for the fool she was. Then, suddenly, she knew what hate was! A new figure appeared on the screen—the figure of Celeste Latrobe! And, beyond that figure, obscure, somehow, a part yet not a part of the drama, the suave, smiling figure of Marsden! The illusion vanished. She was upon her feet, staring wide eyed at her own figure in the glass—a tragic figure, it looked, with tight clenched fists, and jaw set tense.

"If it's tragic, I've only myself to thank!" she cried aloud. "Oh, Brian! Brian!"

At 9:30 the following morning when Marsden called from the hotel to inquire concerning the whereabouts of his cashier, and hoped for sweetheart, he was greeted by such an unintelligible confusion of sobs and sniffles and incoherent sounds that he abruptly abandoned the telephone, turned his office over to his assistant, ordered his car, and in three minutes was speeding toward the Widow Carson's.

Even after he arrived, it was several minutes before he elicited anything like a lucid idea from the bewildered and tear drenched widow. Presently, however, he absorbed the information that one Sam Crane (whoever he was) had related certain facts anent the doings of one Brian O'Neill (whoever he was) and that upon hearing these facts—a Miss Latrobe's name came in somewhere and, that name had, somehow, a vaguely familiar sound—Annette had fled to her room.

Presently the widow settled down to narration:

"An' she rapped on my door, an' it jest on the edge of the daylight, an' she come into the room, an' she throw'd her arms around me—dressed like any outlander, she was, in a flannel shirt an' druggets an' stroud leggin's an' moccasins on her feet! 'Goodby, Mother Carson,' she says, an' her voice sounded hard an' dry. 'I'm goin' to him,' she says. 'I love him! I've always loved him—an' it's all my fault. He's fine, the finest man I've ever known. Too good a man to waste puttin' up fish on the rivers. I've got to save him from himself.' An' then she straightens up, an' a look come into her face, the like I never seen before. A killin' look, it was—a look that sent my brain a-reelin' back to them pictures in the old history about hairy men with stone headed clubs, an' women that hid their naked-

ness behind the skin of a beast. 'She'll never have him!' she says, in a voice hard as a man's. An' then she was gone."

Marsden stared, uncomprehending.

"Gone?" he said. "Gone where?"

For an instant the eyes of the Widow Carson strayed from the suave, bewildered face, to the carefully creased trousers, the immaculately polished shoes, and back to the face again. And in that instant other faces flashed into her brain—her husband, Tom Carson, of the old Royal Northwest Mounted Police, Sam Crane, Father Giroux, Leith—men, these, real men—and then the face of Brian O'Neill! An unaccountable anger surged within her, anger born of her pride of these men she had known.

"Gone!" she cried. "She's gone to the rivers. Back where she come from! Back where she belongs! She's gone to fight for her man!"

"But I do not understand. I—last evening, I—asked her to marry me. She was to have given me her answer today—"

"You've got your answer."

"But she was dressed, you say, like an outlander? And that she has gone to—to take up with this—this riverman, or fisherman, or whatever roughneck he may—"

The Widow Carson took one step forward, her gray eyes flashed, and a militant finger shook pointedly and very close under Marsden's carefully cropped mustache:

"Roughneck! Roughneck is it? You dare to stand here in my house an' say that Annette Beauleau would take up with a roughneck! Be gone, get out, or I'll scald you out! You an' your fine clothes, an' your automobile too! Git! Riverman he may be, an' fisherman, but he's be'n to a college till there wasn't nothin' more they could learn him! Roughneck! She can thank the Lord he ain't a *damn' dude!*"

Mr. Marsden drove back to the hotel, wondering . . .

FOR THE second time that summer, during the early hours of the morning a car bowled northward from Edmonton, conveying a single passenger, who carried no baggage, to Athabasca Landing. And for a second time the storekeeper at the Landing watched that single passenger load an outfit into a hurriedly purchased canoe and push out into the current of the great river as if to the manner born.

"Don't you want a guide?" he yelled, as the girl shoved off from the bank.

"Does one need a guide to go home?" she asked, and pushed into the stream.

"It's a damn' funny thing," he confided to his clerk. "Him an' her, both—they was dressed like downriver folks—an' heaven knows, the way they throwed their stuff into them canoes, an' handled 'em, they must of be'n downriver folks! But, both of 'em, their hands was soft lookin', an' their faces white—an' *her!* There wasn't never no one looked like her on the river—or else I'm goin' down there, you bet!"

Ten days later Annette Beauleau swung her canoe toward the landing of the mission of Father Giroux. The ten days had worked wonders with Annette. The sun and the wind had browned her face, and the paddle had toughened her hands and the muscles of her lithe young body. Save at the Grand Rapids, and the Pelican, where she had hired Indians to help, she had done her own portaging. She was fit. And, save for the bobbed hair, and a certain poise that the past five years had given her, she was to all appearances the same Annette who had left the mission upon that January day in company with Inspector Crane and Corporal Johnson.

At least, so thought Father Giroux as he rose from his chair on the little veranda of his cottage to welcome her as she approached across the little plateau that was the playground of the children.

"Ah, my daughter," he said, as the keen old eyes beamed, and the thin lips smiled. "I knew that one time we of

the rivers should welcome you home."

Tears welled into the girl's eyes—flowed unheeded down her cheeks. Her heart seemed bursting with a vast, glad happiness. The whiff of tobacco smoke from his long stemmed pipe, the friendly pressure of the long lean fingers upon her shoulder, the long hair that fell like a cascade of burnished silver upon the shoulders of his black robe, the light of welcome in his eyes, and the words of welcome on his lips—this was home! For a long moment her eyes swept the horizon of spruce spires and splendid distance—the North! Then they closed to picture tinted walls, bronze grills, tiled floors, liveried flunkies, the endless counting of money—a closely cropped mustache that almost, but never quite, touched her lips—the City!

"Oh, Father Giroux," she faltered, "I have been such a fool."

The wise lips smiled in tolerance.

"The privilege of youth," they said softly. "But why do you say you are a fool? We are proud of you, we of the rivers. We have gloried in your success."

"Success!" the word was half a sob. "Father, what is success?"

THE SMILE was gone from the lips, and in the keen gray eyes was a look of infinite softness.

"That is a hard question to answer, my daughter. I think that deep in the heart of each of us, the answer lies buried."

"Father, were you always so wise?"

Almost, the girl regretted the question. Intuitively she knew she had struck deep into the heart of this man who was her friend. The silvered head shook a slow negative.

"Wisdom is bought with a price, the price of experience. I, too, have been a fool—and the years have rolled on."

"A fool!" cried the girl, and impulsively she raised her lips to the weather tanned cheek. "Why, Father Giroux! Your word is law on the rivers."

"Aye, my daughter. And happiness has come to me, after many years, in looking after the welfare of my people."

"Where is Brian O'Neill?"

"Sit down. Or maybe you will step to the dormitory and ask Sister Agatha to fetch us tea."

"I'll help her with it," cried the girl, and sped away while Father Giroux reached for the tobacco jar and meditatively refilled his long stemmed pipe.

Annette appeared presently with the tray.

"Boiled tea, Father, real boiled tea! Oh, Father, it is so good to be—home!"

"Aye, my daughter, and good to have you home. Though I'm doubting that we'll be holding you long."

The twinkle had returned to his keen old eyes. Annette sipped her tea.

"Where's Brian?" she asked again.

"He is somewhere to the northward, acting, I believe, as guide to a party of—of tourists, or hunters, or something."

The old priest may have expected surprise on the part of the girl, but he was totally unprepared for the look of ferocity that leaped into her eyes.

"Where are they?"

"I do not know. Possibly Leith could tell you. They outfitted at Chipewyan. Sam Crane brought the word. It is a month or so agone."

The girl half rose from her chair, but sank back as Father Giroux raised his hand.

"I would speak with you, my daughter. In the first place, why do you seek Brian O'Neill?"

"Because I love him. Because I have been a fool and have always done the wrong thing. Because Sam Crane told me he has gone back to just what he was before he got his education. Because he's got no business putting up fish. He's got no business trapping. He's got no business guiding. And because the woman he's guiding is—is beautiful—and attractive and—smart! But she'll never get him! He's mine! He loves me, and I love him!" The tirade ended with the girl leaning half over the tea table, and her hazel eyes staring wide into the understanding eyes of gray.

Father Giroux smiled—a wide, benign smile of perfect understanding.

"God bless you, my daughter! And do not allow me to detain you. I had planned an argument with you. An argument having to do with the welfare of Brian O'Neill. It is the will of God that civilization has restored to him that which he thought civilization had robbed him of. We of the rivers will yet be proud of Brian O'Neill, and one or two of us—the best, and the oldest friends, maybe—Sam Crane and I—will be prouder still of—Mrs. Brian O'Neill!"

"Sam Crane! I hate Sam Crane! It is because of Sam Crane I am here. He came, and he actually *boasted* that Brian had forgotten his education. He *boasted* that he had put up fish for Leith, and for you. That he had trapped. That he was acting as guide to the Latrobes. He boasted that this girl could light a cigaret in the wind like a man, that she knew how to wear her clothes, and that Brian had got all rigged out in a new suit. I'll throw that suit in the fire."

"God be with you," murmured the priest contentedly. "There remains little to be said, except that I must take off my hat to Sam Crane. He told me he would dip his paddle in."

"Do you mean?" cried the girl, staring wide eyed into the guileless face of the priest. "Do you mean—" there seemed to be no words.

"Aye," answered Father Giroux. "I mean that Sam Crane loves you as a father. I mean that he loves Brian O'Neill—"

The words were taken out of the aged prelate's mouth—

"And I love you both, you two old conspirators!"

CHAPTER XXIX

IN THE CAMP OF THE ENEMY

AT FORT CHIPEWYAN Leith welcomed the girl with evident delight.

"Weel, weel, 'tis glad I am to see ye, lass. Comin' fra the city, 'tis sma' folk ye'll be thinkin' us river people, the noo."

"Why, Mr. Leith, I'm river people myself!"

"Losh, lass! Ye do look it, the noo, I'll admit. But weel I remember the fine lady ye was when ye met me on the street the time I went outside, an' ye took me to the hotel, an' they gi' me a room wi' a bath-tub, an' water sae hot 'twould ha' scalt a hog. An', lass, it never cost me a cent!"

Annette was smiling.

"Where is Brian O'Neill?" she asked.

"Brian. He's off guidin' some folks that come into the country."

"Where are they?"

"I can na' say wheer they be, the noo. 'Tis aboot six weeks agone they pulled oot, wi' four canoes an' seven Injun packers. They paid off the Injuns an' sent 'em back at yer auld cabin, sae it looks like they di'na figure to go much beyont."

"The old cabin!" cried the girl. "What in the world would they be doing at the old cabin?"

Instantly into Annette's mind flashed the abrupt demand of Celeste Latrobe that she tell her the name of her father. And the explanation that followed the demand, that she had once known a man that spelled his name as she spelled hers. Why had the girl made that strange demand? And why had these people gone directly to the cabin of Jovin Beauleau? Could it be possible that there was some connection between these people and that letter her father had written years before? If so, why had they waited so long? And what about Colbert?

Leith was speaking, but she scarcely heard him, so thickly did the unanswerable questions crowd themselves upon her brain.

"I can na' say why they went to the cabin, lass. I di'na know they had gone to the cabin till the Injuns come back an' told me. They said somethin' aboot spendin' a month or more i' the wilderness. An' the mon said somethin' aboot its bein' f'r the gude o' his daughter's health. But, losh, lass! For a' I could see she was a healthy jade. She was na'

sae hard on the eyes, neither. But, losh—ony mon wi' a grain o' sense i' his pate, could see she was triflin'. She ogled the lad that come in wi' um, an' she ogled Brian O'Neill. An' what must Brian do but rig hisself oot in new an' gaudy clothes, the like he would ha' made fun o' any mon wearin', whilst she stands by eggin' him on tellin' him what a braw figure he made. If foor years in a college can do that to a mon, I'm glad I ha' na' sae much as stuck my nose in a spellin' book!"

"Mr. Leith, did my father ever tell you that he had found gold?" asked the girl.

"Aye. I mind 'twas the time he mailed the letter. He said he'd found gold, an' in a few years he'd be rich. But I di'na pay much heed. He never showed ony gold. I'm thinkin', maybe, he was a leetle touched i' the head."

"You don't remember who that letter was addressed to that he wrote?"

The old Scot combed at his red beard as his brows drew into a pucker.

"No—'tis a long while back. I must o' know'd, onct, but I've fergot. 'Twas the only letter he ever wrote, an' it might o' got lost, f'r there never com' ony answer."

Annette's eyes hardened.

"Yes, there was an answer," she replied. "Colbert, the man Brian O'Neill shot after he had killed Johnny Big Fish and was about to attack me, was the first answer to that letter—and I'm not so sure but what these Latrobes are the second answer."

"Losh, lass—ye don't tell me! An' ye think that ye're father writ aboot his gold, an' the mon, Colbert, an' these come to git it?"

"Colbert told me that my father had written to his sister about the gold. I do not know the name of my father's sister, nor do I want to know. But it may well be that this girl—this Celeste Latrobe—is my own cousin."

"God forbid! Losh, lass—what a hell o' a relation to have! But, relation or no relation, ye'll na' be lettin' her steal Brian O'Neill fra ye?"

The old Scot noted the clenching of the fists, and the tightening of the muscles of her jaw as she answered:

"I have come to find Brian O'Neill. But I want no man who does not want me. I'll go and find Amos Clawhammer, now. I'll be wanting a couple of Indians to help me as far as Tazin Lake. From there I'll go on alone."

CAUTIOUSLY, Annette approached the little cabin by the well remembered trail from the falls. Each turn of the trail had revealed some familiar but long forgotten landmark—a rock, a twisted banksian—and now the cabin itself, looking for all the world as if she had stepped from it but yesterday.

She swallowed, but the lump in her throat persisted, and she drew into the shelter of a young spruce. For several minutes she waited, eyes and ears alert. But no one was in sight and no sound came from the cabin. Stealthily she approached and placed her eye to a corner of the window. The cabin was deserted for the moment, but manifestly occupied, as supplies and duffle of all sorts were stowed neatly about.

Slipping around to the door, she entered and stood gazing in fascination at the familiar room—the two bunks, the stove, even the pictures she had pasted on the wall when she was a little girl. She glanced nervously out the door. These people might return any time. They were doubtless out along some creek hunting her father's gold.

She was about to slip back into the bush and await their return, when the early training of the born outlander asserted itself. Almost subconsciously, she noted that there were not sufficient dishes on the shelves for a party of four. Swiftly her eyes roved the room. The blankets had been removed from the only bunk that was being occupied; the other held supplies. Also, there were no pack sacks in sight. Evidently, then, these people were away on a trip of some kind. Swiftly crossing to the stove, she felt that it was still warm. It was ten o'clock.

They had breakfasted here and then hit the trail. Stepping outside, the girl circled the clearing and in a few moments picked up a fresh trail that led to the eastward.

Before turning into the scrub to recover her own pack sack, she crossed the tiny plateau to the edge of the bluff, and for a long time she stood staring down at the two graves.

Sick at heart, she turned away. Had her father found gold? And, if he had, was Brian O'Neill helping these unspeakable Latrobes to locate it? Had Brian gone, heart, body and soul, over to the camp of the enemy? If so, she knew, and well knew, that she had no one to blame but herself. She would soon know . . .

Swinging her pack to her shoulders, she struck out upon the trail of the four. She had gone but a few miles when she realized that the trail was bending toward the north. Also, that it was a most peculiar trail for one of Brian O'Neill's woodcraft to make. It traversed a black spruce swamp that could easily have been avoided. Its long, sweeping curve was increasing its length by half. Then, as she topped a ridge, she halted suddenly and flattened herself against its rocky apex.

Before her, scarce fifty yards away, grouped upon the bank of a swift, rushing river, stood the four she had been trailing. Brian plunged in and, feeling his way with a pole, forded to the opposite bank where he slipped the pack from his shoulders and returned. Latrobe and Bryce took the ford, Latrobe feeling his way cautiously with Brian's pole, with Bryce close at his heels.

Annette's eyes narrowed and her lips pressed tight as she saw Brian stoop, lift the girl bodily and carry her across the river. She saw the girl's arms close about his neck, and she saw the girl's upraised lips smile into Brian's face.

When they topped the next ridge Annette forded the stream. She easily kept the laboring group in sight. As she plodded on she wondered in an impersonal sort of way that there was no rage in her heart against Brian O'Neill. Only a dull ache—a pain, not poignant, but ever present. Not until she had talked with Leith had the thought occurred to her that Brian might prefer this other girl. She realized, now, that she had come into the North—furiously, grandly—to give herself to the man who wanted her, to save him from accepting the spurious for the real. But, in the heart of this man, had the spurious become the real? If so—well, there was Edmonton. She could marry Marsden. Or go on being pointed out as the highest salaried woman in Alberta.

Again perplexity at the trail method of Brian O'Neill forced itself upon her. He was following the sloppy margin of a muskeg, when a tangent trail would not only shorten his course, but also avoid the muskeg.

Was he deliberately grueling these people? No, obviously not, for as they reached the muskeg he had dropped back and relieved Celeste of her pack. But why go out of one's way to follow a muskeg? Annette gave it up, and followed, keeping to the higher ground, conserving muscles and miles.

AT NOON, on the corner of a low, broad ridge, they camped. Creeping as close as the scant timber would permit, Annette saw that all stood for some moments grouped about a certain spot. Then Brian made a fire and they ate their lunch. Annette lay in the scrub and gnawed pemmican, wishing the while for a cup of good black tea.

Luncheon over, the four again grouped about the spot, and suddenly Brian lowered himself to his hands and knees and disappeared. Latrobe followed, and Celeste and Bryce dropped to their knees and, with faces close to the rock, seemed peering into a hole.

"The gold!" thought Annette. "My father's mine!" An icy chill gripped her heart. "And Brian led them to it," she muttered aloud.

With a rush came remembrance of what

she had heard of Brian's education, from Sam Crane, from Father Giroux when he was in Edmonton, and from Leith upon his memorable trip. Seth Adams had written that the college had never before turned out a geologist like Brian O'Neill. She remembered that, although she had managed to preserve an air of vast indifference, the news had thrilled her to the depths of her being.

And now Brian had placed this vast knowledge of his directly into the hands of her enemies. At first the thought stunned her. Then, as coherence returned, she summoned a thin lipped, bitter smile.

"Well, why not?"

What had she ever done to Brian O'Neill except cause him pain? He had loved her, she knew that, and in return for that love what had she given him?

A cry reached her ears from the depths of the pit into which Brian and Latrobe had disappeared. Latrobe emerged, and after him, Brian. Brian set to work putting up the tent, while Celeste and Latrobe and Bryce walked about here and there, measuring distances with a tape. Once Brian came within ten yards of her, lopping branches from the spruce trees for the beds. She stared in fascination at the white cap with the blue tassel, at the clean new shirt, at the high laced boots. With a shock came the realization that the drawn look—the look that had added years to his age when she had last seen him that night in Mother Carson's sitting room—had gone. To all appearances he was the Brian of other years, the Brian she had begged to marry her, the Brian who had steadfastly refused because he must first acquire an education. Well, he had his education. He had offered it first to her—and she had scorned it. What more fitting than that it should now be turned against her?

She saw Celeste and Latrobe approach Brian, and watched while Latrobe, with many gestures and much pointing, indicated certain sections of the ridge. She saw Brian smile and nod, and noted the look with which he met the smiling eyes of the girl—a conference, doubtless, in the which they had appealed to Brian's scientific understanding.

Followed, then, the chopping and setting of numerous stakes, and the building of rock pyramids about their bases, and much consultation over the markings thereof.

Came the deep twilight that is the summer night of the sub-Arctic. Again Annette chewed pemmican and wished for tea, as she watched the others eat supper. When they heaped wood upon the fire and gathered round for the evening camp talk, she drew nearer. A wind twisted spruce, so warped as to have been worthless for stake making, and so coarse of limb as to have been discarded for bedding, served as cover whereby Annette drew close to the fire. Every word was distinctly audible. She heard the gloating over the discovery of her father's mine. She heard Jovin Beauleau ridiculed for the fool he was. She heard her own name mentioned by Celeste, and knew that the girl had rightly divined who she was. And through it all Brian, though he took no part in the conversation, sat smoking his pipe with an approving smile upon his lips.

Annette found her way back to the cabin, found it in the half dark, by traversing hardly half the miles traversed by Brian O'Neill in leading the Latrobes to her father's mine.

That night she slept in her own bunk. Slept? Rather lay in her bunk, as the highlights of her life—and the life of Brian O'Neill—passed once again in slow review.

Sunlight found her at the falls. Long she stared at the spot where she had dragged Brian O'Neill from the river—and wondered.

The Indians had left a canoe at the upper portage landing, and she paddled across the lake. She covered the long portage to Lake Athabasca, and that night she camped with the pounding surf of the big lake as her lullaby.

On the return trip she avoided Fort Chipewyan, and also the mission of Father Giroux. She would not face Leith. She could not face Father Giroux.

CHAPTER XXX

SETH ADAMS

AT FORT McMURRAY Annette came face to face with Seth Adams. She beached her canoe and started up the bank in the direction of Miss Gordon's store, when a man rose from the rock upon which he had been seated and stepped forward to meet her, hat in hand.

"Have I not the pleasure of addressing Miss Beauleau?" he asked.

The face was vaguely familiar, and Annette summoned her hotel smile.

"You have—if it is a pleasure," she said, wondering whether she should know him.

"Indeed it is a pleasure! It is always a pleasure to meet a beautiful and an attractive young lady, and especially a lady of the outlands." The man was smiling, but with so genuine and patently sincere a smile that her first thought that here was some drummer seeking to impose an hotel acquaintance, vanished. "My name is Adams—Seth Adams, to be exact. And I believe that I had the pleasure of meeting you some five years ago at Fort Chipewyan."

Seth Adams! That she should meet, at this time, and under these circumstances, the man who, more than any other had been the cause of Brian's leaving the North, of his leaving her.

Annette stood rigid, while the blood froze in her veins. And then the poise born of five years of contact with a sophisticated world dropped from her as a mask. A gleam of savage hate was in the narrowed hazel eyes, and from savage, twisted lips, the word—

"*You!*" And again—

"*You!*"

The man smiled. And with that smile, unaccountably, the sudden flame of rage was quenched. It was as if Father Giroux had smiled.

Annette stared into the kindly eyes that smiled into her own flashing ones above the neatly trimmed gray imperial.

"Yes, me."

Somehow the girl knew that this man had deliberately used the ungrammatical form.

"I think there are things we should talk about."

The girl remained silent, waiting. Adams resumed:

"In the first place, Miss Beauleau, let me state that I know that I am speaking to the woman who, through sheer worth, has risen to the position of commanding the highest salary ever paid to a woman in Alberta. Anything that affects Brian O'Neill affects me. And I have not forgotten that upon an occasion Brian O'Neill killed a man with his bare hands—when the man presumed to lay hands upon you. And, I understand from good authority, that he had killed another—for the same reason. Therefore you must mean something to Brian O'Neill, and therefore you must mean something to me."

"And yet, you have let Brian O'Neill go back to just what he was before your damned education got into his soul?" With her words, Annette's excitement grew. Anger got the better of reason and she raved on, "You took him out of the North, and you have flung him back into the North! You have educated him—they tell me that your college never turned out a better man! A better man for what? For putting up fish for a Hudson's Bay Company post? For trapping fur? For acting as guide to any chechako that comes into the country? There's your Brian O'Neill! You'll find him boiling tea for tenderfeet! Making their beds! Waiting upon them like any bellhop! Why didn't you give him a position in some way commensurate with the things he knows? What is there in the North for him? He belongs in the North—and he will never go out of the

North!" From sheer want of breath the girl paused.

Seth Adams was still smiling.

"For which, may God be praised, my dear. Also, I think that no woman is ever more beautiful than when in an honest rage."

The smile, the tone of his voice, the kindly gray eyes steadied Annette. The flame faded from her hazel eyes, and she found herself regarding this quiet, smiling man seriously.

"Will you be seated?" he said.

Annette seated herself upon a stone.

"It may be natural, or unnatural, that you are part and parcel of the general panic," he began, to the utter bewilderment of the girl. "If I trespass upon the grounds of good taste, I know that you will set me aright. Insofar as I know, I am speaking to one who has, even more, if possible, than I myself, the interest of Brian O'Neill at heart."

Seth Adams paused. Annette remained silent. He continued:

"As you may, or may not, know, I in my official capacity must direct the activities of many men. These are specialized men, men who are trained to do certain things and do them well, thoroughly. There must be no mistakes. These men are scientists, and it is of vast importance to the Government that they do their work well."

Again the man paused, and Annette asked—

"You said a general panic—I don't know what you mean by a panic?"

Seth Adams's smile widened to a hearty laugh.

"I mean just this, my dear lady. Every one on the three rivers has been pestering hell out of me for the past year, because Brian O'Neill is doing just exactly the thing that I want him to do! Just the thing that I sent him up there to do! Father Giroux wrote me about him. And even old Sam Crane tried to call on me in Ottawa."

"But," interrupted the girl "you did write Brian a letter to come to Ottawa for a conference. Sam Crane told me you did."

"I did. I could have used him to good advantage to myself, on a job for which I had no liking. It was a Northern job, specific information demanded by parliament, about nothing that amounted to a damn. Brian could have saved me the trip. He didn't."

"But surely you know that Father Giroux and Sam Crane and I are friends of Brian O'Neill. Surely you know that we have his best interests at heart. And you know that we know—the rivers."

Adams smiled.

"All that I well know. *But I didn't know Brian O'Neill!*"

The girl gasped.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean just exactly what I say. I picked Brian O'Neill—I picked him on account of his lineage. I picked him because he had been born in the North, and because he had always lived in the North, because he was of the North. I picked him because he was the only man I had ever seen in the North whose brain seemed to be worth a damn—you will pardon the French, I'm sure. I took him out of the North. I directed his education, or tried to. But I found out that the scoundrel learned half again as much as I planned for him to learn. Then I sent him back into the North. There are commercial enterprises, in Canada, Miss Beauleau, that will pay Brian O'Neill almost any salary he will name, to have him on their payroll—for what he knows.

"I know that Brian knows that. I sent him into the North to take the gaff. To weigh what civilization can give him, against what the North can give him. I sent him up there, knowing that all his friends would damn me off. I sent him up there, knowing that every man he came into contact with would deplore the fact that he still stayed in the North. You know, Miss Beauleau, there is a final test that they give steel—a super-test for steel that is to be used for very special purposes. This steel would look all alike to you, or to me—but when the time comes for it to stand the stress and the strain for which it was smelted and

devised, it has got to make good. That was the stress and strain I purposely put on Brian O'Neill. He has withstood for a year the offers of mercantile corporations. He has withstood the pleadings of people he knew to be his friends. He withstood my summons to Ottawa."

"And what for?" asked Annette logically. "So he can get out Mr. Leith's fish?"

"Just so," answered Seth Adams. "So he can get out Leith's fish—or do any other job that ever comes up in the North."

FOR A measure of minutes Annette sat and regarded Seth Adams. He lighted a cigaret, offered Annette one, and she smoked.

"And suppose he stands the stress—what then?" she asked after a few moments of silence.

"Then," answered Seth Adams, "he will be the director of the Geological Survey of Canada."

Annette choked up.

"Do you mean—"

"My dear lady, I have been trained to say nothing but what I mean. I will explain. I am growing older—men do. I have enjoyed my work, loved it. I am so deeply interested in it that I can not turn it over to any ordinary man. I have certain influences that know that I love my work for my work. You may call that politics if you will, but where it is used as I am using it—I think it is good politics. I have been asked to name my own successor. I have named Brian O'Neill. In my opinion he has stood the stress and the strain. I will take the departmental job off his hands. I shall remain Director Emeritus. I feel that the full title should be with the field officer. He does the work."

There was a long pause as both sat gazing out over the blue waters of the broad Athabasca. Seth Adams lighted another cigaret. So did Annette.

"What's bothering you, lady?" he asked.

"Nothing," answered the girl. "I wish Brian O'Neill every success."

Seth Adams, the suave presenter of facts before parliament, the sophisticated director of the Geological Survey of Canada, blew up.

"What's the matter?" he cried. "Damn it! We've got to get down to facts. Rip my title off, rip off your sophistication—What about Brian O'Neill?"

Something in the man's attitude, something in the all encompassing fatherliness of him captured the girl's imagination—and she told him all she knew. When she had finished, Seth Adams smiled.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE NEW DIRECTOR

FOUR days later came an outfit from the North. Latrobe was the first to set foot ashore, and he was the first to attempt claim of attention from that time on. The fact that his daughter was not only beautiful, but knew her stuff, was the only drawback. Latrobe had found gold. The outfit was rich—undeniably, disgustingly rich.

In a little corner of Miss Gordon's store, where only few people ever foregathered, Seth Adams and Annette waited. They had watched the rush to the recorder's office, and had seen the air of opulence that actuated Latrobe's every move. He summoned Brian O'Neill.

"Ah, guide—what do we owe you?"

"Not a damned cent," said Brian.

Seth Adams punched Annette Beauleau in the ribs, but it did not mean anything to her, except that Brian was refusing pay on account of Celeste.

Adams smiled.

"I know the Latrobes," he said. "They are an old family—too damned old!"

He walked out of Miss Gordon's store, closely followed by Annette.

Almost instantly Latrobe gushed forward.

"Why my dear Dr. Adams!" he exclaimed.

Beside him was Celeste. And a pace back, Bryce.

"Hello, Brian O'Neill!" cried Seth

Adams to the guide, who hung back.

Aristide Latrobe was astounded. He was floored. That the mighty Seth Adams, the director of the Geological Survey of Canada, should flout him, Aristide Latrobe, to speak to a mere guide was incomprehensible—to Latrobe.

Brian O'Neill paid no attention whatever to the greeting of the mighty Seth Adams but walked over to the young outlander woman who accompanied him.

The moment was tense. Brian spoke:

"Miss Latrobe, permit me to introduce my fiancée, Miss Beauleau—your cousin."

Celeste was staggered. Was this the voice of the guide—the uncouth outlander who had boasted of his mission education? Who was this man who would turn down recognition by the mighty Seth Adams to talk to a girl—and what a girl? The cashier of a hotel!

Annette also was staggered. That this man who, only a few short days ago, had listened to the revilement of her father and herself with a smile on his lips was calmly introducing her as his fiancée . . .

Celeste broke the silence with a laugh.

"So you are the daughter of my dear Uncle Jovin? I suspected as much when I saw your name displayed at the hotel—a manicurist, was it not?"

"Yes," answered Annette quickly. "It was not."

Celeste was furious.

"So you are the daughter of my mother's scapegrace brother—Jovin Beauleau?"

"I do not even know the name of my father's sister—if he had one," said Annette. "But if he did, I think I can see why he chose the outlands."

Stung to fury, Celeste cut loose.

"Oh, he had one, all right! One who was smart enough to put aside a letter your father wrote several years ago! A letter that told of his finding gold in the hills north of Lake Athabasca. Even so, we might never have found the gold, had not your most amusing yokel, Brian O'Neill, played into our hands, and most accommodatingly discovered your father's mine. I wish you joy in his memory."

All had listened to the girl's outburst, and all eyes centered on Brian O'Neill.

"Hm," said Brian, and puffed a cloud of blue smoke from his pipe.

"And," supplemented Latrobe, "the claims are all safely filed."

Then Brian laughed. He turned to Annette, who had stood, white faced, through the ordeal.

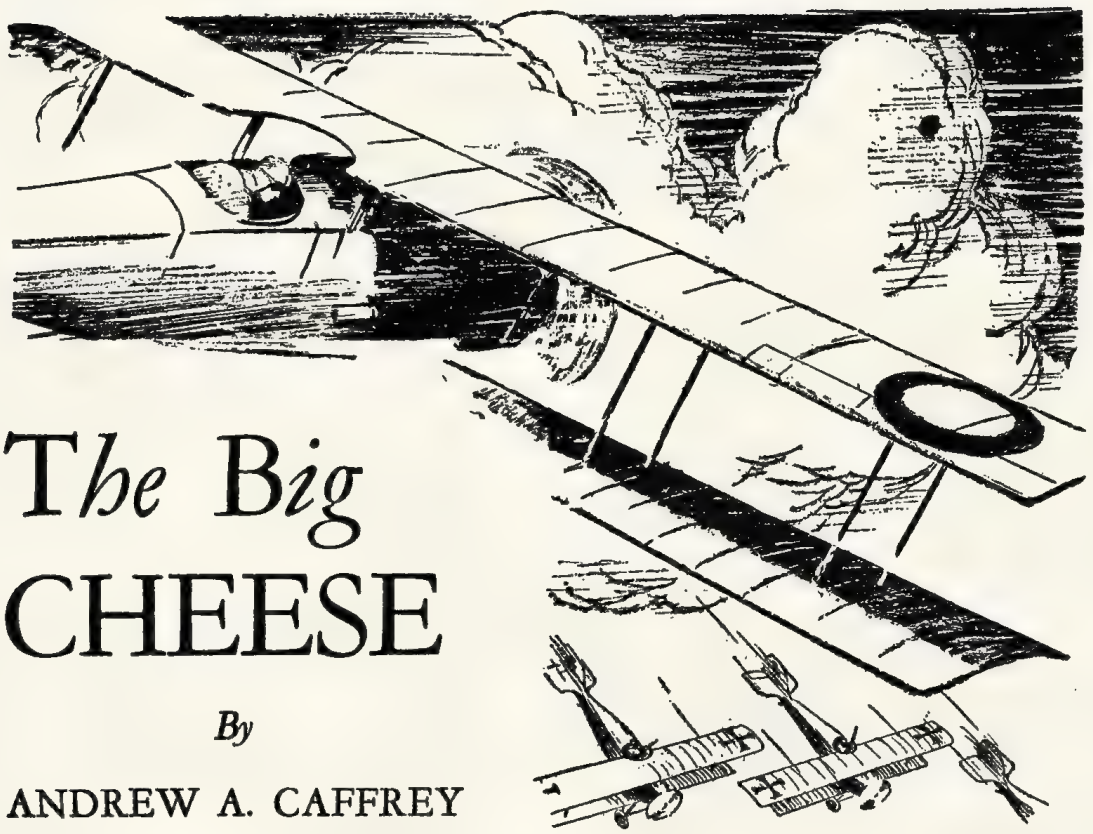
"Your cousin is right. Your father found gold—and such a vein of gold as I think has not been uncovered in years. After your father's death I prospected for the gold he said he had found, but I could not find it, because then I thought that all gold was panned from the sand and the gravel of creeks. Then I forgot about his gold. I thought, like Leith and Sam Crane, that he was a little touched in the head. Until these people came along. They were so obviously not what they claimed to be that I took the job of guiding them. I knew they were hunting your father's gold—but I didn't think they had a chance till one day Celeste showed me a sample that Beauleau had sent to his sister. After that it was easy. I knew exactly what to hunt for—and where to hunt for it.

"I found it. I knew the people I was working for were crooks and fourflushers, and that made it easier. I found an old prospect hole of Beauleau's and, a few days later, I found his real strike—and it is a strike! Millions of tons of high grade galena, all in sight. I carried back a couple of sacks of the chips from the real claim and salted the old abandoned shaft. Even, after that, I figured I'd give them a chance to be halfway square, but—"

"What do you mean?" cried Latrobe, livid with rage. He turned to Celeste. "What is the fool talking about? What does he know of gold? Why, the fool—"

"Just a moment," said Seth Adams. "While introductions are in order, I will take pleasure in presenting to you Mr. Brian O'Neill, the new director of the Geological Survey of Canada."

THE END



The Big CHEESE

By

ANDREW A. CAFFREY

The Story of a Front Line Air Patrol

THE NEW *chasse* pilot, Lieutenant Pike, was flying his first patrol with as stiff an upper lip as possible. All his attention was on his formation work; these other birds, six older men at the war game, were not going to be able to find any fault with his aviating. The flight leader, before the take-off, had told him to fly tight. Flying tight was one place he was good. This thing of getting in close and lapping wings was to his liking. And if successful patrol hops depended upon this, Pike knew that he could hold his own. Not every one can fly close. Many birds are more afraid of neighboring craft than they are of enemy bullets. It does take the stiff upper lip to stay when six other motors are milling right in against wing tips. Pike liked this close flying.

More than once, in the last half hour, the man to Pike's left, and ahead, had raised a right hand, and tried to tell Pike to give way—to fly a little wider. Pike had laughed to himself.

This other flyer was Hal Roquefort. They called him the Big Cheese of air. Pike had known him at ground school back in the States. Even then, on the threshold of cadetship, Roquefort and Pike had had differences. When the Big Cheese of air had made better and faster progress than Pike and some others, he had not failed to rub it in. Roquefort did not hate himself, to any damaging extent, at any time or place. Fact is, the Big Cheese deserved the nickname, more or less. Quite a grand way—was Roquefort's.

But Roquefort had done well in air. His Front record was good. Six planes and two balloons stood to his credit when

Pike came up as a replacement to the Poisoned Pup squadron.

And now Pike was throwing a scare into Roquefort. That was good. Here was a Front line bird with his wind up because of a little crowding. Pike wondered at that. Strange that a man like the Big Cheese should retain such a fear. What on earth could a man, who had faced guns, find to fear in ordinary formation flight?

Pike had his orders. Those orders were to fly tight. And tight he would fly. He was not going to run any chances of getting a call, upon the flight's return, for going loose. The man at his rear, Billy White, was flying close enough. Pike looked back. Close enough was right! Billy White's propeller, if it should win a little more ambition, would be nibbling Pike's right wing tip.

Pike, unconsciously, crowded Roquefort a little more.

The Big Cheese grew a little madder, and his right thumb humped up and down, out and off to the right.

"Give way!" his lips were framing. "Lay off, and fly wider!"

And Pike smiled, waved back, crowded a mite closer; and the flight went on.

TOWARD the end of the first hour of patrol, which was usually the half way mark of a two hour gas supply, Pike noticed that the outfit had tensioned a great deal. This was enemy territory; and a place that had seen much hard going air work of late. This enemy location had been the cause of his coming to the Front as a replacement. There were many such places. Pike could not recognize this exact spot as such but, judging by the watchfulness of his flight mates, anything was expected here, and just about now, perhaps.

The leader, a few minutes before, had warmed his guns with a short burst. Pike watched the others try theirs. Then he, taking care not to spray the Big Cheese, had done likewise. That was good. Fine for the morale to see those tracers on the job. Pike looked to his formation more than ever, tried to recall all he had ever learned, and knew a certain strange fear that he had never known before. Fact is, Pike, in there for the first time, was undergoing the nasty throes of a cold sweat. He could think of any number of places he would rather be; but, being here, he was set to give an accounting. Uncle Sam, he was going to prove, had not sent a boy on a man's job when he sent Lieutenant Ned Pike up here to fly a Spad—and move in the same company as Big Cheese Roquefort.

Roquefort, Pike now noticed, was all eyes. He never seemed to be watching in any one direction more than a flash. Nothing was going to get Roquefort while Roquefort knew it. Pike found himself kind of leaning toward Big Cheese, sort of wishing that he could edge in on the other's knowledge. Pike began to feel that he was more or less outclassed in this fast Poisoned Pup company. Why, every one of these jaybirds was old to the game, weeks old, and on the flying Front, that was plenty old. They knew how to meet 'em. Knew when to unload, and when to hold their fire. Right now, they were where they had been so often. Nothing new would surprise them. Whatever was coming, no matter how it arrived, Roquefort and the rest would meet it as it should be met. Pike was afraid now that he might pull a boner. That fear chilled him. Not a personal fear any longer, but a dread of getting in bad with his mates.

"They said stick close," Pike repeated over and over again. "I'll do that if it's the only thing and last thing I ever do. And it is one thing I can do. They'll never say, 'Pike was afraid of his own mates.'"

Pike never knew where all the action came from when it did come. All of a sudden, ships to his right and left, afront and to the rear began to rock, and the pilots to point. They were all pointing down. Pike looked too. A mile below, a two-seater Hun was

dragging slowly east. Then the Poisoned Pup leader wiggled his ship 'o line of flight once, and went. At the same time, Roquefort went into Pond's place and took up the lead. Looking again toward the diving Pond, Pike saw that a rear plane was also diving with the flight leader. More or less, the entire attention of the Poisoned Pup gang was on those dropping Spads. All hell broke loose. Planes, enemy Fokkers, came in droves. They came with guns wide open. In a single backward glance, Pike saw two Poisoned Pup pilots fall off to the rear, and out of control. Plugged cold!

In that minute, Pike wanted to fight, and he wanted to make a run for it. There were other things he wanted to do, but they were all crowding, and he could not straighten them out. One thing he was going to do, though, and that was stick to his orders, and stay with his flight. Still, the whole gang was running.

That thing of turning back into a dog fight was out. Pike had had the folly of such action too well drummed into his skull to ever think of such action. Such action, anyway, was only for hangar stories and out and out suicides. All of a sudden he realized that he was tickled pink to be following Roquefort. And also, he was glad to follow the Big Cheese in a big dive. The whole works was in a dive. And, above his head, a quick glance told him, Billy White was with them too. Billy White was covering Pike. Pike liked that and he did not—they were babying him. A mad desire to turn aside came to Pike—yes, but when Pike saw the glass dial shot from the tachometer on his instrument board he changed his mind.

PIKE stuck very close to his mates, and stayed with the diving hell at all sides. But there were not so many of the Poisoned Pups diving now. There were not so many left. But when the dive had dropped them to where Pond's two-seater prey had loafed, Pond and the other Spad came into the fight. That made a fairish bit of difference. Pond, alone, was as good as a small gang in any doings. The coming of those two, coming unexpectedly as they did, stopped the retreat. A fight was on, and more of an even fight, too.

Through it all Pike was in the thickest of the milling. That mortal fear of being found wanting kept him at it. He got a German, and got him cold—or hot—saw the bird fall away in flames. Then, seconds later, still trying to keep the Big Cheese in sight, he suddenly found his guns bearing upon, and straight into a Hun cockpit. Pike was half on his back at the time. He shoved his stick ahead, fluttered down till he nearly collided with the enemy plane, then fired a long burst. He saw that plane fly away with a dead man on its controls. Then he found Roquefort again; actually went looking for him. And he saw Pond. White was still there. The four of them—Big Cheese, the leader, White and himself—were the only Poisoned Pups left. And, for the time being, for a brief minute, the war was over, and the two hostile flights were reorganizing.

Then they were at it again. The world went mad once more, and Pike wished for the end. Any end. This was awful. Maybe when this ended there would be less than four. Pike wondered. But he fought. He scored another Fokker. Now he was enthusiastic, if he had not been before. Three ships in one flight, and his first time over the lines. A flash came through his brain, a flash of pride that told him this might be a record. Pike made up his mind to live, and return at any cost. Three ships. That is a day's work for any man.

Pond went away from the dog fight following an enemy. At the same time another enemy went down on Pond. Then Roquefort went after them all. And Pike followed Big Cheese.

Pike saw Pond's propeller quit. Pond, then at ten thousand feet, went into a spin. Two Fokkers spun with and after him. Big Cheese dived them straight.

Pike rode down as fast as any of them. Big Cheese knocked one of those German birds into the quick eternity. Then, as Pike came in very close, the second Fokker hung it on Roquefort. His right wing, the entire outer bay of the right lower wing, was shot away. Quickly, Roquefort went out of the fight and into a glide. He still had his right upper, and the right upper of a Spad carries the aileron surface. Pike watched Roquefort put on full left rudder and drop his right aileron in an effort to hold the damaged right side up. To a certain extent, that worked; but, just as it promised success, the one remaining Fokker dived the damaged ship. Pike dived too; and that one Fokker never knew what struck him. Pike had covered Roquefort to the king's taste.

Big Cheese, still fighting that glide, fell into a spin. At seven thousand feet he redressed from the spin. Pike was close behind him. For a short time again, Big Cheese managed to flutter and stall, made yet a little more progress back toward the Poisoned Pup's 'drome. And still Pike followed. Intent upon covering Roquefort's limping, game retreat, he was forgetting self entirely.

At six thousand feet, Big Cheese again lost headway. His Spad dropped that low right, lower still. Did several fast turns of a spin. Came out at four thousand and five hundred. Pike was trying to think what could and should be done here.

High overhead, covering their retreat at better than the ten thousand foot level, Flight Leader Pond and Billy White were on the return, also. There was no sign of enemy craft. Just how the last stages of that fight had ended, and just how many enemy craft went home, Pike could not guess. He turned again to Big Cheese. The latter's Spad was falling off to the right for another spin. That spin was long.

The Front lines were nearly five kilometers away when Roquefort pulled his ship out of that spin, at three thousand feet, and again redressed his flight. Behind the lines, many kilometers beyond, Pike could now make out the partly hidden clearing that was the squadron's 'drome. Roquefort—and Pike knew as much—was not going to reach that home field. One or two more spins, and the Big Cheese would spin his last.

PIKE flew in a little closer, and he thought a little harder. And he pondered what he had known for the last several minutes—that Roquefort's one chance was in his hands. In Pike's hands. In the hands of a man who had the ability to fly close formation, a man who for some minutes had not had the courage, however, to make a big try. And, maybe, a bigger sacrifice. Then, taking all that he could muster of manhood, Pike went in a whole lot nearer.

Oh, Pike could fly a beautiful formation! His fine fingered handling of throttle and control was a thing at which to marvel. Many fields had handed it to Pike for the manner in which he could lap wings with other willing birds. And, at times, Pike had been known to fly in and lap wings with boys who were not willing and could not see the fun in such doings. And Pike used to laugh. Now, lapping wings, in an archie sprinkled sky, was not so much fun. But Pike came in a little closer. And just before Roquefort's Spad could drop its right side for another fast spin, Pike's left panels reached out, tucked themselves under Big Cheese's damaged surfaces, and began to carry the load.

Pike stood hard on his full right rudder. His motor now carried top throttle. Roquefort threw full power to his. And the two ships, as one, went on and on.

Through a hail of anti-aircraft fire, they passed the front lines. They were so low that rifle fire hit them here and there; yet this big piece of work never halted.

Roquefort flew, smiled a bit, and waved Pike onward.

Pond and Billy White were coming down.

Pike hit the ball, looked longingly for that home field and kept his mind strictly to his well known ability to fly close.

"They ordered me to do it," he kept saying, over and over, to himself, "and they can never accuse me of swinging wide. And to think that old kid Roquefort didn't like my style."

Finally, with the Poisoned Pup's 'drome just beyond the trees, and almost within gliding distance, Pike—and Big Cheese, too—knew a moment of elation, and a new fear. While they had been on patrol, a German bombing squadron had located the field. There below them was a mess of wreckage, and a field that was pockmarked from end to end with bomb holes. Pike went sick. No doubt Roquefort did too. The idea of landing a Spad, alone, on such a field, was nearly out of the question. But this thing of putting down two Spads nearly out of control, at the same time, was madness.

Pike and Roquefort managed to fly a wide turn of the home field, and, while doing this, they watched Pond and Billy White go in for their landings. Bumping and tossing, with White's plane finally standing on its propeller end, they saw the two come to rest. Pond and White got out of their ships O. K. Then, being thoughtful boys, they made ready the ambulance at the deadline for their two air-stranded mates.

Pike and Big Cheese knew that their numbers had been drawn in the lottery of an unkind Fate, wherever such drawings are held. Their gasoline was just about done. Already, for the last fifteen minutes in fact, they had been running their motors on—the Lord knows what!

On the ground, Pond said to White:

"There's only one thing to be done, Billy. We'll have to get a gun and shoot those boys in order to save their lives."

"Everything's jake," the squadron cook said. He had forsaken his kitchen to watch the grief. "Everything's jake if you do shoot those two birds. I've got beefsteak for you boys today. But I'm short two cuts of the present count. If you shoot these two birds, everything's jake."

"Serves Roquefort right," Billy White laughed. "That new bird Pike tried, during the whole trip in, to get friendly with Big Cheese. He kept snuggling in close. Would Big Cheese have anything to do with the new boy? Not at all. Serves him right. Now let him flutter around up there for awhile and get clubby. A new boy has a right to fly in close and get acquainted."

"Bet Roquefort thinks so now," Pond laughed. "Now isn't that the darnedest situation you ever saw on this Front? Two boys with the whole big world under their wheels and no place to land. I'll bet this wouldn't happen again in a thousand years, and—"

But what happened right then will happen every time a gasoline tank runs dry; and Pike's supply had reached its end. His motor stopped. When that power plant quit, the two planes were approaching the field intent upon landing at any cost. Roquefort cut his switch, pulled his gas tank rip cord, and got set for a crash.

Together, both pilots began to feel for the ground. With the fast glide, the ground came up. Both planes hit the same bomb hole at the same time. There was much rolling, much cracking, much dust, and a little cussing.

The ambulance came fast. Everybody who could hang on came with it.

They pulled an immense pile of tangled wreckage from above where that thin stream of cussing was arising. With the wreckage removed, there on the ground sat two flying boys who were as denuded of clothing as are twins on their birthday. Not a scratch showed upon either. When they discovered this, they quit their cussing.

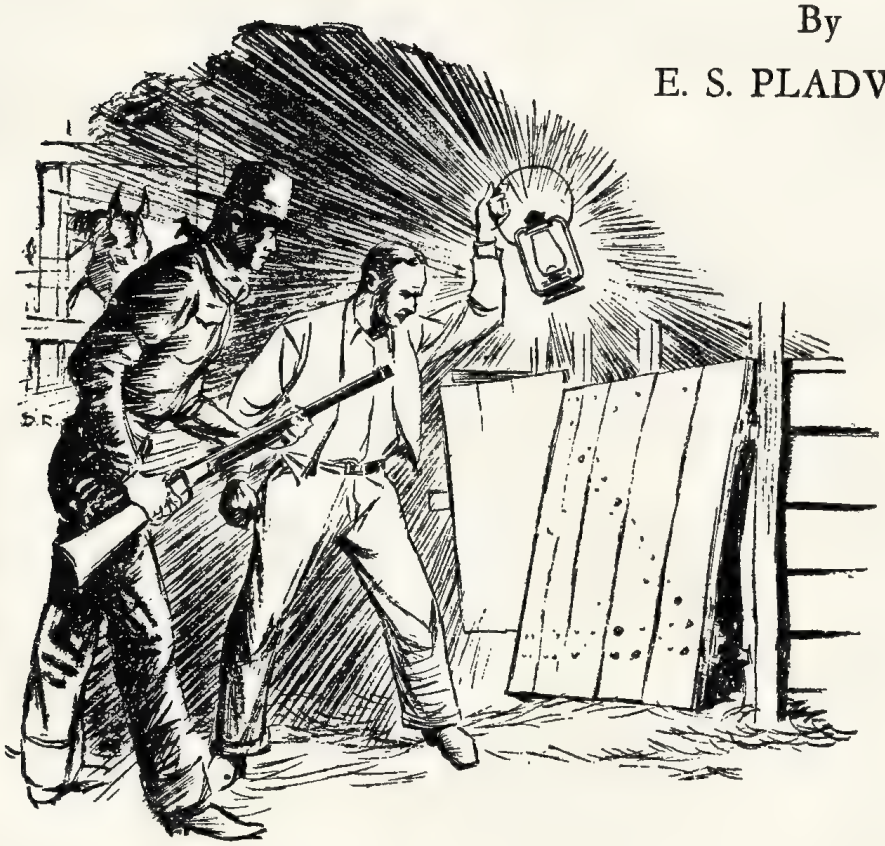
Roquefort laughed a bit. Then he reached out and shoved Pike.

"Get away from me," he yelled. "I'm beginning to look like you."

CARMELITA

An Unusual Story of the Modern West

By
E. S. PLADWELL



AGITATED hoofs drummed in the barn behind the little three room house where Tom and George Merriam were sleeping. Snorting horses, on the verge of panic, thumped against the stable's rear wall. The voice of a stranger growled profanely from the interior of the big adobe building.

Tom Merriam jumped out of bed as if he had heard a fire alarm, for his sleek, nervous thoroughbreds, picked up at bargain prices after they had performed badly at track meets from Vancouver to Tia Juana, were the jewels of his bachelor heart. He loved every hair on their shapely bodies. Even his younger brother —his partner in this little Arizona breeding ranch—was hardly privileged to handle them, so the presence of strangers in his barn was worse than a mere intrusion; it was sacrilege.

Swiftly he drew on his clothes and boots while calling to his brother:

"George! George! Some one's in the stable!"

But he did not wait for the sleepy young man. He opened the front door, turning to the left toward the great black silhouette of the barn, whose roof loomed up squatly in front of the chill November stars and the silent hills to the northward.

A streak of yellow flame leaped toward him from the stable doorway.

"Git back!" shouted a strange voice.

"Why?" cried Merriam, trembling with indignation rather than fear.

A deeper voice, highly exasperated, came through the excited snortings and stampings from within.

"Damn it, if I'd known these fool plugs was so skittish, I'd 'a' chloroformed 'em. Git go the door, you wild eyed idjut! Git!"

"Hurry up," warned the other stranger.

"Here!" protested Merriam, as he started forward desperately; but a medley of sounds drowned his voice.

A mass of black animals clattered out of the barn, galloping swiftly around its farther corner, to reappear almost instantly as they thundered over the hard ground toward the open from the gate just south of the house. The taller forms of riders seemed to be among them.

George Merriam came up behind his brother, carrying a rifle, The older man grasped George's arm.

"No. No. You might hit a horse."

"Let's chase 'em, then."

"No," decided Tom, in spite of his anxiety. "It's too dark. Besides, those fellows are organized. I'll see the sheriff about it. Come, let's look into the barn."

He ran with the slow haste of a heavy man whose habits were all deliberate. Inside the stable's open door, where a few terrified animals still huddled at the rear wall, his blunt but competent fingers reached up to the exact spot where the handle of a lantern swung on a high nail. Lighting it, he held it over his head.

Its rays shone upon quivering horses and incidentally on his own massive, deep lined, smooth shaven visage with its large nose and its whimsical mouth, whose lips were now drawn in a tight line. His gray eyes stared in dismay under the bushy brows toward the long line of vacant stalls and the four animals who were still present, including Lord William, the big stallion in his box at the opposite side of the shadowy barn. The light threw a thousand golden flashes upon his magnificent coal black body as he snorted around in a fine frenzy, with head up and eyes rolling.

Tom Merriam, giving his brother the lantern, grasped an empty sack which he curled in his hands so that the ends did not flutter when he advanced over the box stall bar toward the big black.

"They got Sister Carrie, Sunlight, Jennie Lind, Geraldine and Ophelia—and Carmelita," he observed in a husky voice. "They won't keep them long, though—So-o, boy. So-o. It's all over now. So-o."

IN SPITE of his hurry, his gentle, miraculously soothing hands rubbed down the glossy coat slowly and patiently, from shoulder to rump, until the wildness left the great stallion's eyes and he began nuzzling his hay, causing the three mares at the other side of the stable to do likewise. Then, with a little sigh, Tom Merriam strode to the barn door, closing and locking it for the first time in months. He strode moodily into the house to get his overcoat before he hastened to an old automobile beneath the trees alongside a dark pool and a little stream which gleamed faintly under the cold starlight, just north of the house and barn.

"Guard the stable," he ordered his brother, as he climbed into the heavy machine, whose motor started with a series of discordant wheezes. "I'll be back at sunrise."

He swung the rickety car into the southern road. It lurched along with reckless abandon for forty miles while Merriam, with the overcoat drawn tight around his body, tried vainly to form some theory—any theory—which could identify the despoilers of his stable; but the problem was still unsolved when he arrived at the utterly dark main street of San Lucas.

The sheriff also tried to evade him. The little baldheaded sheriff, peevishly reluctant to arise from a warm bed, was even more unwilling to excite himself about a few horses when he arrived, half dressed, in the lamplit office at the front of the old fashioned jail.

"I've got enough two legged strays to chase around the country without gettin' all steamed up about a lot o' pampered plugs at five o'clock in the mornin'!" grumbled the sheriff, gazing sleepily through the window toward the dark buildings of San Lucas, where the first hint of dawn was faintly graying all the roofs which slanted toward the east.

"But they might be taken into some other county," argued the horseman in the wrinkled gray clothes.

"M'yeh," conceded the sheriff grudgingly. "Somethin' in that. I'll wire the other sheriffs, then."

"But how about *this* county?"

The sheriff frowned.

"We-ell," he admitted at last, yawning, "it looks like there might be a gang o' horsethieves around here, at that, so mebbe I better look into it. Come back at eight o'clock, when I'm feelin' better."

Merriam, mutely chafing, returned at the appointed hour.

Harry Wingfield, the blond young reporter for the *San Lucas Advocate*, whirled around in the sheriff's swivel chair as the horseman ambled through the doorway. Wingfield's touseled yellow hair flared like burnished copper in ray of sunlight from the window. His face bore a perpetual grin.

"What's this about your skates being stolen?" demanded Wingfield.

Merriam faltered as he looked down into the smiling blue eyes, but the sheriff was not present, so the disappointed visitor had to kill time.

"Well, yes," said the horseman slowly, as he sank into a chair. "Publicity may help. People read your paper around here. Yes, I'll tell you all I know."

As he recited the whole incident with painstaking fidelity, the reporter found himself sympathizing with this courteous man with the leonine face, whose language revealed a wide experience in the outer world beyond the provincial boundaries of the little Arizona county. The reporter—far from a cub—felt a brotherly cordiality toward this fellow wanderer; yet, like many of his tribe when their feelings are aroused, he concealed it by flippancy.

"All these horses were world beaters, I suppose?"

"No. No. Not exactly. Most of them were selling-platers. Bargains."

"Selling-platers? You should worry about losing a lot of also-rans!"

"You don't understand," explained Merriam patiently. "I couldn't afford to buy track winners, so I looked for pedigree. Blood. It often comes cheap. I bought ancestry, for breeding purposes. Understand?"

"But haven't you any fast ones?"

MERRIAM looked out of the sunny window.

"One. I raised her from a foal, though she's six years old now." He hesitated as he voiced her name softly. "Carmelita. Dark brown. Not bay—brown. The sweetest tempered of them all. They can't have her!" He turned toward the reporter, making a gently impatient gesture with his hands. "Where's the sheriff?"

"He's coming after awhile. He was born without a self-starter." The young man grinned again. "Say, I see a good story here for my paper. You don't mind my kidding this business, do you?"

Merriam looked at him sadly. It was no joke to Merriam, yet he nodded his tolerant head.

"Use your own judgment," he agreed, "but please describe every missing horse."

"You bet I will!" chuckled Wingfield, jumping up. "Only I'll throw some class into 'em. See? We've got to pep 'em up. No selling-platers. Every horse in my story will have won the—uh—Kentucky Derby, or something. That'll stimulate interest in finding 'em, see?"

The door closed upon the reporter. Merriam waited patiently for the sheriff, never realizing how Wingfield's freakish sense of humor had inspired him to conceive one of those gorgeously absurd yarns which often added to the gaiety—and the popularity—of his little cow county daily. The reporter was still

chortling about it when he saw his finished product under a bold headline on the front page:

BANDITS OF SAN LUCAS
COUNTY ATTACK STABLE
TO GET THOROUGHBREDS
FOR SPEEDIER CRIMES

Taking a hint from the successful gunmen of Chicago and New York, who scorn to perform their robberies in flivvers but demand the most luxurious of high powered cars, the road agents and cattle rustlers lurking in the back hills of San Lucas County have decided, in solemn convention, to abandon cow ponies hereafter, and operate exclusively with the very finest of thoroughbreds in order to acquire the superior speed which is necessary in these modern times for a good getaway.

The first inkling of this far reaching decision came last night, when the Thomas C. Merriam Stock Ranch, at the foot of San Geronimo Pass, was raided suddenly by bandits who stole such a large collection of fleet racehorses that Sheriff Williams now fears a crime wave which will startle the County. Among the thoroughbreds acquired by the bandits are Ophelia, the sorrel mare which won the Belmont Sweepstakes in 1923; Jennie Lind, the speedy little bay whose performances at New Orleans in 1921 amazed the sporting world; Sunlight Belle, the chestnut flash who burned up the Pacific Coast tracks in 1924 . . .

The chuckling reporter stuffed the paper into his pocket to read to his friends at lunch; but by this time, Merriam and the sheriff were riding two skittish young mares—Bedelia, out of Whitechapel; and Gossip, out of Ballarat—up through wind swept hills of grayish mesquite where the tracks of the stolen horses, imprinted on soft dirt and shale after the herd had swung away from the road, seemed to be leading northward. They went toward granite slabs which shone in the silvery November sunlight along the ridge where San Geronimo Pass, under its low hanging clouds, stood revealed as sharply as if the barrier of mountains had been cut with an ax.

The sheriff rode Bedelia, the fretful roan, to the edge of the granite country. Here he stopped.

"Ain't any use to go into that stuff," he decided. "There's so many pockets and valleys and cañons over yonder that you might search for a month. You'd better go home and wait till your horses turn up somewhere."

Merriam shook his head.

"Do you think they went through the Pass?"

"Nope. Looks like they've swung northeast, into the granite. I guess you'll just have to use patience."

Merriam thought of his exquisite creatures being battered and banged around those jagged labyrinths of rock.

"No," he said slowly. "I couldn't do that. They might be hurt."

The sheriff stared at him irritably.

"Well, I can't drop everything else and go chasin' up here for a week or two. If you want to keep after 'em, go ahead. Organize a hunt."

Merriam nodded.

"All right. I'll hunt."

HE WAS helped by neighbors, who came to the ranch next day, inspired by the story in the newspaper. Merriam led them on two three day trips into the hills around the Pass, but they saw nothing but scenery. Somewhat disheartened, he returned to his ranch at sunset on the sixth day, bidding farewell to tired guests, who rode away at dusk.

A flivver came up from the south, clattering into the yard. Harry Wingfield, clad for the field in tan boots and wrinkled khaki clothes, hopped out of the car.

"I've come to join the hunt," he announced, lighting a cigaret. "War correspondent, see? My paper's getting keen on this business. Have you noticed my stuff?"

"No," confessed Merriam, shaking hands gravely. "I've been too busy. I know it must be good, though. Come in. We have some supper left."

"Good!" cried Wingfield, as he started toward the house. "Say, it's red hot. I got everything I could learn from your neighbors when they came to town, and then I used my imagination. I brought a few clippings with me. Here. Look at this. 'Bandits Hold Track Meet in Robber's Roost'."

"My Lord!" gasped Merriam faintly.

"Well, that is a little bit overdrawn, but I didn't have any real facts that day so I had to smoke up a story. Here's a better one. 'Posse Hunts Herd of Wild Thoroughbreds in Mountains'. I threw some drama into your trip into the hills, see? Human interest stuff. Almost sob. If you had laid down on the job like the sheriff wanted you to, the interest would have petered out, but you've been holding up your end of it fine. The sheriff scoffs but he's half asleep anyhow. Now we'll have to figure out a new line of interest, though—something more substantial. I want to make it dignified but dramatic, see? That's why I want to look over the ground with you."

Merriam's gray eyes stared at him in piteous consternation, but gradually the horseman's lips were forced to show a faint smile. With a grim little nod he accepted the situation, introducing the newcomer to his slim young brother and then to one Joe Kennedy, a burly cowpuncher recently employed to help guard the ranch.

As the reporter ate, his inquisitive blue eyes, never still, flashed around toward every detail of the little home, including the two tiny sleeping rooms and this living room, whose Spartan furnishings reflected the absolute cleanliness of their owner. Wingfield's gaze centered at last on the framed photograph of a woman on a small table at the window corner.

"Who's that?" he asked, as the other two young men started for the barn.

"A friend," grunted Merriam.

"Beautiful woman of the Spanish type. Who is she?"

The horseman hesitated.

"A Miss Ybarra. Carmelita Ybarra."

"Carmelita? Oh. The *real* Carmelita, eh? No selling-plater there. Where is she?"

The frowning Merriam answered haltingly.

"She died."

"Oh. What happened?"

The horseman was reluctant.

"I don't know, exactly. Mexico. The revolution. Anarchy . . ."

Wingfield, turning swiftly in his chair, glanced up at the wistful face turned toward the photograph.

"I get you," said the reporter, with a nod. "And her eyes were brown. Not bay—brown."

MERRIAM whirled on him, but Wingfield lighted a fresh cigaret.

"What's the story?"

The horseman's hand trembled on the back of the reporter's chair.

"No. No. There are some things which can't be joked about."

Wingfield replied gently:

"There are some things which are never kidded by any decent man. What's the story?"

Merriam hesitated again.

"All right," he said helplessly. "It started in Mexico City. We met again in Chihuahua. Then the revolution came. Not bad at first, but they killed Madero. Then there was anarchy. Bandits—Pancho Villa, Pascal Orozco. That sort. Killing and looting everywhere. The Ybarras buried their money. The bandits came after it. They tried murder, torture, everything. The Ybarras were shot down like dogs. Then Carmelita was caught. I fought like a wild man but there were too many of them. They shot me. Left me for dead. When I came to, Carmelita was gone and the place was a wreck. I searched for her everywhere but she had vanished. Not a trace. People said she'd been tortured and then put in front of a firing squad. There were rows of new graves along the road. Dozens, hundreds of them. The American consul found me two weeks later, but the last thing I remember is looking at those little mounds along the road. It was to have been my wedding day . . ."

"Wow!" yelped the reporter.

Merriam held up a pleading hand.

"Let's change the subject, please. Now, about those horses. I think we'll go east this time. We may have been wrong in

going into the granite country. We'll find out."

"All right," agreed Wingfield. "But let's make it a twosome. Why bring a mob?"

Merriam smiled wanly.

"There'll be no mob. They've had enough. They're beginning to lose interest."

"All right. We'll stimulate 'em, then. Leave it to me."

Wearing overcoats, carrying provisions, they started early next morning on cow ponies. Merriam was armed with a pistol and a pair of field glasses. Wingfield was equipped with five packs of cigarets, two boxes of matches, some copy paper, and three pencils. They rode eastward most of the day, across brushy foothills which became more rugged as they led upward until a great flat mesa, hitherto concealed by a semicircle of mountains around it, appeared like a gigantic table backed by distant peaks whose tops were reddening in the afternoon sunlight.

A mass of tiny objects came into view across the grassy tableland as Merriam arrived upon its western edge. He halted his pony.

"By George! Horses!"

Wingfield stopped and looked.

"Yes," he agreed. "That's probably the Mesa Ventoso—Windy Mesa—herd of wild ponies that we've heard about. Worth about ten cents a head if you can catch 'em. Seems like a big herd. Well, why not? Good feed, good water, and nobody bothers 'em."

Merriam brought his field glasses to his eyes. His body became taut in the saddle.

"My thoroughbreds! Look! How did they get there?"

Wingfield grabbed the glasses.

"Wow! That means front page stories for a week! 'Equine Aristocrats Run Wild with Hoi Polloi'. 'Blooded Horses Turn Bolshevik to Dwell with Wild Hoboes of Mesa Ventoso.' See? Think of the possibilities!"

"I'm thinking of the possibilities," retorted Merriam dryly. "I'll have to hire a dozen ropers to get my stock back!"

They rode forward over the waving grass.

HEADS came up in the herd. Suspicious ponies, preparing for flight, ceased grazing to watch the approach of the two men on horseback. Merriam began to recognize his own horses because of their superior height. They were all on the flank of the main body; not quite mingling with it.

The nearer ones began to veer away. The whole herd commenced to retreat.

Merriam's thoroughbreds moved along at their left, though Sister Carrie and Jennie Lind, splendid bays, circled away slightly, looking backward. The sorrel Ophelia also hesitated, but the skittish Sunlight Belle, standing out with shining chestnut vividness from the mass of ponies whose general color was dull black or dirty gray, went galloping away toward the head of the column. Big black Geraldine, far up in front, decided to do likewise. Ophelia followed. Only one horse lingered, a slim, dark brown beauty standing with head up and ears pointed toward the two riders.

"Carmelita," said Merriam, with a catch in his voice.

"Shall we chase them?" asked Wingfield.

"No. Circle northward. We'll come in from the flank. Don't scare 'em. Let 'em get used to us."

They rode for three miles, parallel with the herd, closing in gradually as it kept turning away.

Carmelita still tarried with the rear guard. Merriam approached from the left until he was within a quarter-mile of the bunch. Here he dismounted, taking off his overcoat lest it flap in the wind before he began walking alone over the long grass toward the slow moving herd. Step by step he gained on the brown beauty until his crooning, soothing voice could carry to her ears:

"Come, girl. Come, sweetheart. We

need you at home, old girl. Come to me, pet. Come."

With head up and nostrils distended, she stood with every superb muscle gathered for instant flight; yet so persuasive was the sound of his voice that she suffered him to walk up to her, grasping her black mane, though the glistening neck curved toward the other horses while her ears, pointing forward like two triangles of black velvet, listened regretfully to the faint drumming of their hoofs.

"No, sweetheart," chided Merriam. "Vacation's over. We'll go home now . . . Harry, give me the rope from your saddle."

"Did you say home?" asked Wingfield, as he rode up.

"Yes. We can get to a road by dark, if we hurry. Why linger when we have Carmelita?"

"Yes; why linger?" agreed Wingfield, with his admiring eyes dwelling upon the lean, chocolate brown symmetry of the finest thoroughbred he had ever beheld. "Still, I don't see how any bandit could turn her loose. They must be goofy!"

"All bandits are goofy," said Merriam, as he fastened a rope carefully around the sensitive neck. "Perhaps we ought to be thankful for it. Let's go."

LEADING Carmelita, the two riders reached a road shortly after dark, but it was several hours before they neared the silent house.

A light flashed behind the house.

Merriam halted.

"That's queer!"

"It may be the boys," suggested Wingfield.

"No. They wouldn't be fooling around there at this hour. What time is it?"

"About one."

"H'm. Well, it may be the boys but let's make sure about this. I don't like these mysteries."

"I usually do, but not when they're spooky, like this—"

"Hush!"

Quietly the puzzled riders dismounted, tying the horse to fence posts along the road. The light vanished. It appeared again. It vanished. It reappeared. As Merriam circled around the house, he noticed that the gleam—apparently from a pocket flashlight—was reflected with greenish radiance in the pool alongside the trees, until it vanished again.

Water splashed musically in the pool. A querulous bass voice began rumbling in a loud tremolo:

"Hey, I'm freezin' to death! Gimme some light! I tell you, there ain't no danger. Them two young fellers are tied down in the house and there ain't nobody else nowheres near."

"But somebody might see us from the road," objected a high pitched voice.

"Aw, nobody travels at this hour and the owner's away for a week, chasin' his horses. Gimme that light. I can't stand much o' this."

The ray gleamed out upon the white flesh of a shivering black bearded man standing out of the pool like a grotesque September Morn.

"All right!" he yelped suddenly. "I've got a box under my toes!" He dived into the water.

Merriam, stalking through the grass, felt sympathetic goose flesh crawling all over his cold body, but his hand tightened on the butt of the revolver which he had drawn from his pocket.

He halted, making not a sound. Wingfield was just behind him.

The diver came up, holding a small but heavy object.

"Got it!" he sputtered, wading to the shore with his burden. "That's the first box."

He laid it down with a metallic thump, voicing a loud "B-r-r-r-r-r!" as he reached for a towel on the ground.

"What box?" inquired Merriam, stepping forward.

If he had fired a cannon he could have created no greater consternation. The man who was fully clothed made a slight motion, but Merriam's pistol caused him to change his mind. Wingfield, coming

up behind the man, took something from the fellow's hip pocket.

There was an awkward silence.

The reporter set the light so that it would shine upon all four of them.

"Well?" inquired Merriam.

The man in the clothes mumbled to his companion, who began to use the towel with extreme vigor.

"Mebbe he'll listen to reason."

"What reason?" asked Merriam.

"Well, you see it, don't you?" snarled the nude with the bass voice.

"Hush!" pleaded the other.

Merriam pondered.

"Is this why my horses were stolen?" he asked slowly. "Are you the fellows who did it?"

"We didn't steal no horses; we just ran 'em off for a ways," retorted the diver. "We ain't no horsethieves!"

"Well, why did you run 'em off?"

TWO of the culprits held their tongues, but the man in the clothes finally decided that he might gain mercy by talking. There was a tone in Merriam's voice which was far from harsh. Perhaps the prowler had noticed it.

"Damn it, we wanted to git a little time to do this job in daylight," he explained with half humorous irritation, "but you stuck so close to your darned crowbaits that we couldn't see no other way to git you away from here except by runnin' off your horses, which would make you follow 'em up; but some o' the pesky critters was so ornery that they made a terrible racket and we couldn't bring 'em all out of the back of the barn, so we only ran off half your horses, and then that fool newspaper began to run a lot o' crazy stuff which made people come out here and clutter up the place, so we've had a hell of a time tryin' to git a little privacy!"

"Wow!" yelped Wingfield.

"Aw, shut up!" snarled the diver. "It was a good scheme but it went wrong, that's all."

Merriam pointed to the box.

"Gold, I suppose?" The diver grunted, commencing to draw on his trousers.

"But was it necessary to shoot at me?" chided Merriam.

"I didn't," contradicted the man. "I fired over your head. We ain't done no crime, mister, except mebbe givin' some horses a little exercise; and we only did that to git near this pool, but things broke so tough for us that tonight we become sort o' desp'rate and we figured we'd better start work while we had a chance, because we're a leetle bit hard up. We ain't hurt nobody. Honest."

"Did you tie up Merriam's brother and Joe Kennedy in the house?" accused Wingfield.

There was another silence.

"We-ell, yes!" confessed the man in the clothes. "But that was sort of a necessary evil. We didn't hurt 'em none. We just stuck 'em up and then tied 'em down. Didn't take nothin'. Not a nickel."

"Where did this box come from?" asked Merriam.

Nobody spoke.

"It's probably been there a long time," surmised the horseman, touching the waterlogged wood. "Hidden loot, I suppose. Yes; an ideal place. The water's muddy. No wonder nobody's ever seen the boxes. How many more are there?"

The stranger in the clothes changed the subject.

"Now, I tell you," he suggested, with honey in his voice. "We ain't done no crime, mister. We've just been unfortunate, that's all. But I reckon we've given you some trouble so it's only fair that we ought to make it square, seein' you own the land."

"No."

"Call it damages. Yeh. Damages. Fact is, I don't see no reason why we can't come to a sensible agreement."

Merriam shook his head.

"No. That's impossible. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"As how?" faltered the other.

"We'll have to find the owners of this gold. The sheriff may know."

"Aw, listen—"

"No. It's stolen."

"Aw, for Gawd's sake—" disgustedly.

"I'm sorry for you, but we can't let you go. We can't."

"But listen . . ."

But Merriam, shaking his head, took the protesting captives to the house. Two very angry young men were released from the beds where they had been trussed face downward with gags in their mouths.

Wingfield departed swiftly in his flivver to get the sheriff, and incidentally to write his story for the paper.

The sheriff arrived importantly at dawn with a posse whose rifles and shotguns protruded thickly from under the tops of their touring cars. The sheriff gave the prisoners a rough time in the front room of the ranch-house. He related his findings to Merriam at eight o'clock.

"THEY came back to get the gold which they had buried ten years ago, after the Phoenix bank robbery, before they got sent to the penitentiary. They're just a pair of old has-beens now but they were tough in their day. They got thirty-two thousand dollars in the bank holdup. The sheriffs got hot on their trail, so they put it in boxes and heaved 'em into the pool. This was all open country then. There wasn't anybody living for miles around. The pool was just a water hole for stray cattle. The robbers threw in four boxes, about twenty-five pounds each. They got caught but they wouldn't tell where the money was. Now that you've found it, there ought to be a little reward in it for you. I dunno. We'll see."

"How about the two men?" asked Merriam.

"We-ell, I dunno. They've served their time for bank robbery, and now they've restored the stolen property, though they ain't exactly happy about it. Do you want to swear out a warrant against them? Trespass? Assault?"

Merriam chuckled as he thought of their ice cold bath.

"Let 'em go. I can get my horses back. The poor fellows have suffered enough."

He expected this to be the end of it, but visitors began to arrive thickly on all the roads, aroused by gossip which had buzzed over the ranch-house telephones throughout the county. The southern horizon became dotted with approaching machines which dumped their passengers in his front yard. Crowds flocked to the pool where the sheriff was commencing his official dredging operations. Merriam's yard began to resemble the entrance to a county fair.

A whole fleet of automobiles rolled up at noon. A rackety flivver came past them, halting with sublime impudence near the front door. Harry Wingfield jumped out over the side. A slim little woman in plain black clothes and a dark gray coat remained hesitantly in the seat. Her deep brown eyes, mutely questioning, were gazing steadily at the big horseman standing in the doorway. He was looking the other way, toward a handsome tan limousine. Slowly he turned his head toward her.

The color rushed from his face. His gray eyes widened with amazement. He stood like a frozen man, unable to move a muscle. His lips parted, twitching several times before he could whisper—

"Carmelita!"

Her left hand waved at him weakly.

"No!" he whispered. "No. It can't be!"

But she lurched out of the car, supported by Wingfield.

Merriam rallied his strength. He walked around the front of the flivver like a man in a trance; yet he faltered as she came up to him. His peering, incredulous gaze saw the wanness of her cheeks, the lines of suffering around her mouth, and the tiny crow's-feet around her eyes; yet the contour of her thin face was that of the same exquisitely patrician woman in the photograph.

He glanced swiftly at her left hand. There was no ring there. She had not forgotten him! She had never changed!

Her trembling fingers reached upward, touching the lapel of his coat as if she were not certain that he was indeed in front of

her. His own quivering hand grasped her slim wrist, just below a scar where fire had seared the flesh.

He crushed her hand in an iron grip. She smiled up at him, tremulously.

"I—I have looked for you many long years, my Tomás!"

A THOUSAND incoherent thoughts and questions whirled through Merriam's stupefied brain, causing him to speak helplessly, disconnectedly:

"But—but what happened? They said you were shot. I searched—searched everywhere. But the result was always the same."

She shook her head. Her voice was jerky. She caught her breath between her sentences.

"I could not come back to you, though I tried, my Tomás. They burned me to make me talk. See the wrists? But I could tell them nothing. So they struck me with a gun. And then some women took me to a Ybarra who was hiding. Then sickness. Long sickness. And more war. And Vera Cruz. And peace. And the United States at last." She shrugged her shoulders pathetically. "But then it was too late. I could not find you, my Tomás. Even the racetracks did not know."

"But you tried to find me—"

"Oh, my Tomás!"

With a little sigh, he drew her closer.

The reporter lighted a fresh cigaret. Inhaling the smoke slowly, he watched the tableau. He had learned her side of the case, of course, during the ride from town, where the station agent had given him the passenger, knowing he was on his way to this ranch. He was satisfied with the whole business, including the new headline which he would spring on the unsuspecting public in tomorrow's issue. 'Horsethieves Reunite Lonely Hearts Separated by Anguish of War'. Something like that with pictures, if possible. Good heart interest stuff. Great. The best kind, with all the elements made to order. A one-woman man. A one-man woman. Absolutely perfect. There could be nothing more perfect in this world . . .

"But how did you happen to find me now?" asked Merriam, as he drew away from her slightly. "This—this is a miracle!"

"It is no miracle, my Tomás," she answered, with a little laugh. "You are famous now. Everybody knows of you."

"Famous?"

Merriam's accusing gaze went over her shoulder toward the blond young reporter, alongside her.

"Sure," admitted Wingfield, with a grin. "Didn't you know that? The Associated Press picked my stuff out of the paper and they played it all over the country. I guess it tickled their funny bone, because they kept asking for more. A lot of my hooey was printed in New Orleans, same as everywhere else. That's where she saw it."

"It is so," agreed Carmelita, with a nod. "And the papers spoke of the bachelor who lived alone with his horses!"

Merriam swallowed four times. He was dazed by this amazing sequence of events, yet with a dry little chuckle he reached a hand toward the reporter's shoulder, giving it three slow pats before he spoke in a husky voice:

"All right, boy; start kidding me some more. You seem to bring me luck, and I'll have to get rich now—for Carmelita!"

The Story of a Coward's Supreme Effort Toward Redemption

A CONTACT *with* REALITY

By WESTON MARTYR

BOYS, listen here . . . I'm booked. I know it now. I thought maybe I'd got a chance to see this through; but— Well, look at this damn' arm of mine. It's gone black. It's going bad on me, that's what that means. So I'm done, all right. The trade wind's broke off too. I can tell that from my bunk without going up on deck to see; so we'll get head winds from now on. It'll take this schooner a good month to fetch Samarai; but I reckon you'll have to dump me overboard inside a week—or less, if this flaming weather holds.

I guess you want to know how I got into that—that mess. I'd have told you before, seeing you turned up and done your best to get me out of it; but, you see, I'd got a dead partner to explain, and eight dead boys besides, and I judged you wouldn't believe the truth—nor the police in Samarai wouldn't either, and I didn't want to get my neck stretched. So I thought I'd keep my mouth shut until I could think up some likely yarn. But now it don't matter and I'll tell you.

That bloke you found alongside of me was Lane—my partner. I struck him first in Moresby eight months ago. He was fresh from home and as green as grass, you'd think, because he gave it out all round the beach that he'd got ready cash on him and was willing and anxious to put it into a good thing if anybody

could show him one. Every crook in the Islands was after him right away; but he didn't get skinned, which shows he wasn't the fool he sounded.

I was on the beach myself. I'd been poaching *trochus* that season in the Western Carolines and the Japs had dropped on to me and took my schooner and every bean I owned. So I put up a scheme to Lane. And don't make any mistake and laugh when I tell you my game was to get on to Nukor and have a try for all that shell in the lagoon there. I know Pease tried it long ago, and Schneider and Billy West since, and lots more; and they all fell down on the job. But I'd got a card up my sleeve that looked as if, with a lot of luck, it might do the trick. It sounded all right, anyway, so I chanced it and put it up to Lane.

He was a rum bird. Sort of gentle and polite, and he wouldn't drink. A regular dude he was, and as soon as he opened his mouth you could hear he'd had a good home education and wasn't the kind you'd meet around the Islands as a rule. Anyhow I told him about Nukor and the loads and lashings of shell that was well known to be there and which no one had ever been able to get at. I told him straight what a hell of a place it was—as dry as a bone and so bare that even the cocoanuts wouldn't grow on it. I explained how no one could live on the atoll because there wasn't any water, and about the lagoon not having any entrance fit for a schooner at all. I showed him why anchoring a vessel outside the reef and sending divers into the lagoon in boats wouldn't work—Pease and the rest having tried that and all got into a mess.

I told him how Billy West's schooner got blown off-shore by a typhoon, leaving four boats' crews inside the lagoon, and how, after fourteen days, when Billy managed to work back again, he found all hands dead of thirst.

I told Lane the only way to get that shell was to work it from a regular camp on the island. It had never been tried because there's no water; but my idea was to take enough water ashore with us to see us through.

You can grin all you like, boys; but wait a bit. A gallon a day's enough for any man. And in six months I reckoned the two of us, with eight good boys as divers, would get enough shell to pay us hand over fist—let alone any pearls we might drop on to. That means just eighteen hundred gallons of water, or say two thousand to play safe. Two thousand gallons isn't anything much to handle and I guessed we could get that much landed ashore if we went about the job the right way. Ten two hundred gallon tanks would do the trick, and that, with six months' grub and eight good divers was all I wanted. And I told Lane, if he could put up the money for that, I could fix up a passage for the lot of us to Nukor, and then our fortunes would be as good as made.

It was true, too; with luck, of course. But in spite of all I could think of to say about it, I could see Lane wasn't interested much. When I'd done, all he says is:

"Ah, very interesting, Mr. Petrides, I'm sure."

Mister, mind you! And from the way he said it I could see he didn't think much of my game, or me either. It made me sore, and I said so. And I was clearing off when I'll be blowed if he didn't come straight out and ask me if I wasn't the Peter Petrides who'd come through alive out of that *Yankee Girl* business. I said plumb out I was and told him I wasn't scared of anything any man could bring up against me out of that affair. I told him how me doing in Hall and Petersen was all damn' lies started by that swine Hacker. For Hall and Petersen died in their bunks, boys. The schooner was rotten with fever and those two went down with blackwater. They was bad, and at the last they went mad, both of 'em, and knifed each other—with me there trying to hold 'em down. That's the truth of that yarn, and so I told Lane.

I thought it was all off then, of course; because once a lie like that starts going the rounds of the beach it takes a lot of

living down. But, blow me if, when I'd told Lane that, he didn't seem pleased!

"Good," he says. "You're just the kind of partner I've been looking for."

And believe me, boys, it didn't take ten minutes before he'd agreed to put up the money for my scheme. He seemed as keen as nails on it and was all of a sweat to get started.

IT SEEMED funny to me, him taking to it like that after all; but it didn't worry me long because I'd got what I wanted. I told him, if he wanted a live partner, he'd have to stake me right off, because I was pretty well starved. And he paid up like a man. He wired to Sydney for the tanks and all kinds of trimmings and tucker, and anything I said we'd need he was ready to pay for. We got two diving outfits and a couple of whaleboats, and when I said we'd want tents he said no. If we'd got to live on a place like Nukor we might as well do it properly; and I'll be blowed if he didn't order one of them knock-down tin shanties to be shipped up to us along with the tanks.

It turned up, too, in crates, with the parts all numbered, so all you had to do was to nail the bits together, and there you were with a real house. It had two rooms and a *stoep* all round it, with railings, and—but you saw it for yourselves, and I guess it surprised you to find Nukor with a slap-up place like that built on the beach.

I fixed up with Burn and McEcherans to ship us and our stuff to the island. They run a boat up to the Mortlocks every six months or so, and Nukor wasn't much out of their way; but all the same the freight they squeezed out of us was awful, though Lane didn't seem to care. Then I got hold of eight Louisade boys from Teigner. He seemed mighty glad to get rid of 'em, and that ought to have warned me; but they were a tough, strong looking bunch, and as all of them could dive like fishes that was all I worried about.

We got off at last in the *Paula*. Old Cris Christiansen was skipper, and at first he took us and our dandy outfit for a joke. When he saw our tanks and the crates and things with the bits of house in them, he said he'd heard before how the land crabs on Nukor were a thirsty bunch and he'd often thought of starting a sodawater factory there himself.

By the time he'd got us safely landed though, on the lee side of that island, with all our water tanks rolled up well about high water mark, then he began to see a light. And before he left he admitted he didn't see much of anything to stop us, and I could see he was half wishing he was in on the thing himself. Anyway, he promised to call for us in six months on his next trip north, and then he pushed off. And after that we never saw a sign of anything for five months till you turned up.

We got busy as soon as the *Paula* left. I put padlocks on the water tanks, first thing, and every morning I'd serve out a ration of water to all hands. The house was up and finished inside of four days, and when that was done we started in right away with the diving. And you've never seen anything like the shell there is in that lagoon, boys. It lies thick and close, and it's everywhere. It's not even in patches like you'd expect, but all the bottom's just solid with it. We started the diving in six fathoms, and on the first day we landed a ton and a half of shell and spread it out to rot on the beach. That was mighty good, and I could see, if we kept it up at that rate, we'd have a little fortune stacked up ready to load aboard the *Paula* when she came back for us. And, after a week or two, when things got going properly, two tons of shell was a poor day's work.

You can bet I was mighty pleased at the way the scheme had turned out. I was kind of surprised, too. When I'd broached the proposition to Lane I'd been thinking more of what I could get out of him than what we might get out of the lagoon, and I'll admit it. But when I found I'd steered us both into a good thing after all, I was tickled to death.

But the queer thing was the way Lane took it. He was in luck; but to look at him and hear him talk you wouldn't have thought so by a long shot.

One day I was blowing about the pile we were making so easy, when, dash me, if he didn't come out and try to tell me it wasn't the cash at all that he was after!

"It's not what I'm looking for," he says. "I'm disappointed in Nukor—and in you, too, Petrides. In fact," says he, "I fear you've both deceived me."

Of course I wanted to know what the hell he meant by that, so he says that maybe he'd fooled himself after all, or something like that. He was mighty high toned and haughty-like in all his talk, and blow me if I could make out what it was he thought he wanted.

"If you aren't after the dollars, what the devil are you here for anyway?" I asks him.

And at that he looks at me, sort of sad and sneery.

"*I'm looking* for the truth," he says. "The truth about *myself*."

And then he gets a lot of rot off his chest about how he'd thought that in a place like Nukor and with a partner like me he'd be bound to find what he was looking for. He seemed sorry that all I'd done was to show him how to make some easy money. Said he might as well have stayed at home and opened a grocer's shop.

I couldn't make it out at all. I thought he must be a bit soft in the head and I told him so. And you can judge for yourselves what a poor sort of a mate *he* made for me on Nukor—mooning about looking for the blooming truth about himself! Did you ever hear the like of it? And thinking I was going to help him, too! *Me*, mind you! What did the poor fool take me for? A blooming parson?

Well, after that Lane quit—as far as the work went anyway. He used to creep about by himself all day, and most all night, too, doing nothing. Just walking about and thinking and looking sulky. Keeping to himself. I tell you he was damn' poor company.

"For God's sake, mate," I says, one night, "what's up with you? You never were what I'd call cheerful; but you seemed all right enough when we were getting things started and while we'd everything to risk and nothing sure. And now, when it's all over bar the shouting and raking in the cash and everything working out so nice, I'll be blowed if you don't look as if the whole show had busted on you. What's eating you? Are you sick, or what? If you aren't, then it looks to me, from the way you've chucked your hand in, that you're nothing but a blamed quitter."

And somehow or other that started him off. He began to talk, and he hadn't hardly opened his mouth to me for weeks before that. I think he must have had a touch of fever on him that night or something. Anyhow, he opened up. He got all worked up, too. He went as white as a corpse when I called him a quitter, and when he got going good his eyes went big and shining. And he kept on hitting the table with his fists. I didn't quite tumble to what it was all about, because the language he used was a bit above my head, and I'll admit it. I've been brought up tough, I have, and a lot of the things he said went right past me.

He was in trouble all right, though. I could see that easy enough. He got off a lot of stuff about the fighting he'd been through in France. He'd been in it right up to the neck according to him, and I gathered he hadn't liked it. He told me—and the Lord knows why he did—but he told me, with the sweat fair dropping from him, how he'd been in a hole or a trench or something with the rest of his crowd, and they'd been ordered to hump themselves out of there and go over at the Germans.

HE TOLD me the bullets were slamming in streams right into the front of that trench, fairly shaking the ground when they landed as though each one weighed a ton. There was lots of shells, too, bustin' around; but he said it wasn't them, but

only the bullets he minded. He seemed mighty anxious I should get that clear. It's funny, and I can see him now, sitting there staring hard at me and sweating.

The long and short of it was they all jumped out of there and went on, but Lane funked it. He stayed where he was, listening to those bullets plunking into the dirt. He says he couldn't bear the thought of it; and I said I thought he'd shown pretty good judgment, so why fuss himself about it now? And at that he jumps up so quick I thought he was going for me.

"Can't you see, man?" he yells. "Don't you see? I'm a coward! A *coward!* And I've been living in hell ever since." And then he says, but very low and quiet this time, "I can't go on living with the thought of it." With that, blast me if he doesn't drop his head on the table and start right in weeping.

I judged he'd got the fever real bad then all right, and it must have gone to his head. A sort of crying drunk, you understand. That blubbering business gave me the willies, too, so I pumped a good strong whack of gin and quinine into him.

Pretty soon he started to talk again. And a lot of slush it was. Some rot about looking for a chance to make a man of himself again. He says that's why he'd left home and come out to the Islands. That was the only reason, he says, he'd come with me to Nukor. Can you beat it? He'd been warned in Moresby against me and Nukor—especially against me. So he'd jumped at the chance. The chance of making good, *he* called it.

Yes. He actually had the nerve to ask me to believe that trouble was what he was looking for. Trouble! He said he wanted to find out if he could face it. It naturally made me tired to hear any one talk muck like that, so I turned in. I lay back on my chair there on the *stoep* and went to sleep.

And the funny thing is I hadn't hardly got off before the trouble started. I was woke up by a hell of a smash close to my ear, and the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was one of our big splitting knives sticking in the side of the house right alongside my nose. And whoever it was who'd hove it at me meant business, because the thing had stuck right through that piece of eighth-inch corrugated iron sheeting. I was half asleep still, I guess, because I remember wondering to myself how the hell that knife could have got there.

Then there was yells from outside and some more knives arrived, and I beat it inside for my gun. The lamp on the table was still alight when I looked out in the *stoep* again, and that young fool was standing there with his mouth open and a face on him the color of a cod's belly. I sung out to douse the glim quick and come inside out of it. But he seemed kind of stuck there, so I let go a shot or two at the place the yells was coming from and made a break and flung that lamp outside.

After that I was mighty busy till the daylight came, for those Louisade boys of ours were out for blood. I knew what their trouble was, too. They wanted to get at our water. They'd been grousing right along about what a little I'd give 'em. You see I'd judged it wise to cut down their ration pretty considerable on the chance of the *Paula* getting held up or something and not turning up as soon as we expected.

Diving's thirsty work, I know, but I reckon I wacked out enough water to go round if the boys was careful. And it wasn't my fault if they swallowed the lot each day as soon as I'd give it to 'em. They'd feel powerful dry, of course, later; but to hear them singing out for water all the time you'd have thought the beggars washed in it. They didn't get any more out of me anyway, and for the last few days I'd noticed them beginning to look ugly. I was all ready for trouble if they felt like starting it; but I'd never handled Louisade boys before so I didn't know what swine they were once they made up their minds for it. It's a fact I didn't give 'em credit for having the guts to go for us or play the game they did. And that's where I made a mistake.

I SPENT the rest of the night sneaking round and round that *stoep*, and whenever I heard a sound I'd fire at it. And then I'd have to shift quick, because those beggars would let fly a knife at the flash of my gun, and once or twice they very near got me. My notion was to keep them from getting into the house and away from the water tanks, which I had stowed under the *stoep* so as I could keep an eye on them. I knew if the boys once got inside I was done, and you can believe me I kept on the jump pretty lively all night long and I was everlasting glad when the light came.

As soon as I could see, those boys sheered out of range, quick. But the sons o' guns had left it a bit late and I got two of them while they were on the run. When I looked around I got a jolt that brought me up all standing. The sand below me had all turned brown, and I knew right away what that meant. It was wet! Those blasted boys had got at the water, and when I jumped down to look I found four of the tanks with holes in them where they'd driven a pick head through the iron, and it only needed a kick or two to tell me those four tanks was empty. We'd drunk up two tanks and over by then, so those four tanks gone left us with only four more to last us until the *Paula* got back again. And the *Paula* wasn't due for months.

That rattled me for a bit, but after a while I saw I would be all right if I could only manage to scupper the rest of the boys before it got dark again. I could see I'd got to finish 'em. No matter what I did they'd die in the end from thirst. And I couldn't let 'em live anyway, because then they'd be sure to get me. So I judged I'd better get the job finished and done with before it got dark.

Before I started, though, I took a look round to see what they'd done to my partner. You see, as he'd never shown up through it all to give me a hand I made sure he'd been done for right at the start. I couldn't see him anywhere at first, and it wasn't till I went inside the house to get some cartridges that I found him. The skunk was hiding his carcass behind our pile of stores and grub and stuff. That's where he'd crawled to, the mangy dog, leaving me all alone the whole night to do the scrapping for the both of us.

I thought he was dead at first, he lay so still; but, by God, he wasn't touched! I was mad when I found that out, and the kick I gave him fair lifted him out of there. Then I told him a bit about himself. I told him he wasn't a white man. I said the only white part of him was his crawling liver—and how even that was striped with yellow streaks. I said a whole lot, I tell you, and at last the sight of him standing there with his head down and saying nothing got me so riled up I sailed into him and knocked his face in.

I hadn't got much time to waste on him just then or I don't know what else I might have done. But I knew I'd got to finish the boys while it was light, and it might be a long job. So I filled my pockets with cartridges and started off. I walked along slow, shooting into every bush I came to, and I flushed those boys one by one and drove the lot ahead of me all round the atoll. They ran like smoke, but I knew they were my meat so I followed slow and careful. The atoll's that bare there's mighty few spots where they could hide, and if I kept them going before me I knew it wouldn't be long before we'd come to the end of the reef. And then there'd be nothing for them to do but wait for me—or swim.

As it turned out, I got four and the sharks got the other two. They were no trouble at all except for the last one. He'd been our cook boy, because he was the only one who could make out to say anything I could understand. And when it came to his turn he dodged me for a long while around a lump of rock. The beggar didn't want to go and he kept on trying to say so.

"Me good boy," he says, dodging round all the time. "Me *good* boy, master."

But I got him at last—clean with one shot.

Well, that was that. All done. Makee finish. It put the lid right on the diving business though. Without boys to dive we was busted. So after that there was nothing else to do but sit around and wait for Christiansen. That was a long wait. It was a hell of a long wait. Thanks to you it didn't last as long as I thought it would; but it was a good three months that Lane and I were all alone on Nukor.

It wouldn't have been so bad, I guess, if only I'd had a mate I could talk to. But Lane was no mate to me at all. He never was, from the start; but after things had busted up I'd have felt better off all by myself than with him creeping about the island like some blooming corpse all the time.

He was worse than a corpse though. You know where you are with a corpse. It's dead and done for and there you are. But to have to live alone with a chap who never speaks to you for weeks and weeks—well, you try it. It's worse than spooks. It ain't human. It's not so good if you've got to live alone with any man for long, especially if you haven't got any use for him. But he *is* company, even if all he'll do is row with you. But Lane—well, I might just as well not have been there at all for all the notice he ever took of me. He'd just sit around and sulk, and not even answer me when I spoke to him. Gosh, he was a dismal swine!

At first I tried to kid him along a bit.

"You've come a long way looking for trouble, according to you," I'd say. "And now you've found it, how do you like it?"

I'd tell him things like that and try and jolt him up and make him say something. But it wasn't any good. Whatever I'd do or say it wouldn't start him. He'd never speak a word. Just sit there all day long as dumb as a dead fish and not nearly as cheerful. The beggar wasn't listening to anything I'd got to say, and most of the time, blast him! I don't believe he even heard me.

He'd sit there, thinking. And what he'd got to think about God knows, for I'll be blowed if I could think of anything new to think of. He'd just sit there and think and think, and twiddle at his blasted eyebrows.

That was a trick he'd got, and it used to get me. He was everlasting at it. Twiddle away at his eyebrows he would, with his fingers. Twiddle and twist and pull 'em, hour after hour and hour after hour without stopping—and all I'd got to do was to sit there and watch him. Lord, how it used to rile me! That and the silence and things. It doesn't sound much; but—well, if you'd been there you'd understand it. Day after day and week after week. It got on my nerves.

I remember sometimes I got to screaming at him.

"Stop it!" I'd yell. "Stop it, before I rise up and tear the face off you."

Things like that I'd say, and he'd stop his twiddling then, maybe; but he never even looked at me. He'd start off again, too, twiddling and picking and messing with his face, till I'd feel I'd got to bust. And I'd rush off cursing and kick something. It sounds silly, but it was *hell*.

I GOT that way at last, I thought I'd have to murder the fool. It wasn't my fault. He drove me to it, sitting there dumb and never noticing me or what I'd say. I went for him at last with my bare hands. I mauled him good and made a proper mess of him. I had to, d'you understand? I *had* to. And I think, if he'd only fought back then, I'd have patted him on the back and kissed him. But he wouldn't fight. Just stood there till I sent him down, and stayed down till I kicked him up again. The damnedest, yellowest cur . . .

Well, after that I gave it up. I never touched him any more. What was the use? I never touched him. But I used to talk. I had to do something. So I'd tell him what a creeping skunk he was. Stowing himself away and leaving me all by myself to stall off the boys that night they tried to do for us. And hiding in that trench, like he'd told me himself, while his mates went over at the Germans.

That used to tickle him up, boys. I

was mighty glad I remembered that. It was the only thing that made him take notice, so I used to let him hear it pretty often. At first, whenever I'd start on that lay, he'd turn white and sweat and I could see him getting a hold of himself. But after a bit, whenever I began on him, he'd get up and walk off. In the end he walked away to the other side of the atoll; and he stayed away by himself for a day and a night and all the next day.

And when he came back, boys, he was mad. He must have been clean off his nut, because no one but a madman would have played the game he tried to. He wasn't roaring, raging mad, you understand. He didn't come back hollering out and raising Cain generally, like you'd expect. No. It was worse than that. He was quiet. *Very* quiet he must have been, for I sleep light and I was sleeping when he came and I didn't hear him. I woke up with the feel of something touching my wrist and I looked up and saw him standing over me.

"Lie still," he says. "Lie still, Petrides, and listen."

And I lay still. Mighty still. Because he'd a splitting knife in his right hand and he looked like splitting me with it if I as much as winked. I guess I looked scared. I *was* scared—waking up to find a thing like that. Anyway Lane says:

"No, Petrides, I'm not going to murder you. We're going to fight it out. But don't move yet. Wake up and pull yourself together. Take your time," he says, "because this has got to be a fair fight. Look at your wrist," he says.

And when I looked and saw what he'd done, then I knew for sure he was mad, in spite of the quiet way he was talking. He'd got one of the chains I used to fasten the manholes with on our water tanks, and he'd twisted it tight around his left wrist and mine and snapped the padlock on the whole business.

"There's no getting out of it this time," he says then. "I've thrown away the key."

He'd got me, you see. He made me stand up and tells me when he gives the word I'm to reach behind me and I'll find a knife like his on the table. Then we was to fight, but he wanted it all fair and proper. He seemed mighty anxious I should think it was all fair. He kept on talking, too, and I was glad of that, because the longer he talked the more chance there was for me to get him before he expected it.

He was watching me close, though, while he talked. He made out the thing was a test he was putting up on himself, or some such craziness. A test of courage he called it. But I wasn't listening much. I was watching for a chance. But I remember he called me a wolf. Yes, a murdering wolf he called me! He said he'd chained himself on to me to make sure, when it came to the point, that he couldn't back out of it. You see, he *was* mad all right.

"There's no way out now," he says. "I can't crawl off and hide from it, *this time*."

The funny thing was, from the way he said that, you'd have thought the beggar was glad.

I could see by then that the only chance I'd got was to try and scare him. He was easily scared. I knew that already. So I had a try at it.

"All right," I says. "If you will have it, you will. But triced up this way we'll be like two cats hung up on a line. We'll slice each other to ribbons. I'll do it, though," I says, "but you fight fair, mind! You've been talking a lot about fair play and all, so now let's see I get it. Don't you go cutting at me till I've got hold of my knife and I'm all ready. You give me time, and play fair, and I'll carve you up, my buck, into little pieces. I'll slice that yellow liver of yours," I says. "I'll slit your lily white throat from ear to ear. Slow, I'll do it. Or, maybe, I'll rip your guts up."

And when I said that I could feel him shaking. He was weakening quick and I knew it. So I felt behind me, slowly, for the knife. But I'd hardly got hold of it when he screamed out like some girl in a fit and started slashing at me. That was a nice bit of fair play, boys, if you like!

He got me twice. Once on the face here, and once in my neck. I got one back at him, then—right in the ribs. I felt my knife grate on a bone and it stuck there. I couldn't pull it out. So I dropped it and tried to grab his knife before he did for me altogether.

The first time I only got hold of the blade and he pulled it through my hand, cutting me clear to the bone. The second grab I made I got him by the wrist and held on to it. Things was going black on me by then. I'd lost a lot of blood, I guess, and I was feeling dizzy. So I knew I'd got to finish him quick or else he'd do for me. I'd shoved him back against the railings of the *stoep* and before I dropped I gave him one more shove—and over he went, backwards. He capsized clean over the rail, and my left arm being chained like that to his, he nearly took me over after him.

He didn't, though. Not quite. I wish he had. We'd have fallen a good eight feet to the ground; but that would have been better than the mess we got into then, with him hanging down on one side of those railings and me on the other.

I must have been hanging there for a long time before I came to again, because the blood had stopped, and it was caked and dried all over us both. I was lying on the *stoep*. At least my legs were; but the rest of me was sort of dragged up hard against the railings. The first thing I saw was Lane's face the other side of the rails. It was almost touching mine, because he was hanging there, full stretch, by his left arm. Something seemed to be trying to pull my arm out by the roots, too, and I looked to see what it was. I was hung up just like Lane was, but the jerk on the chain when he'd dropped had snapped my arm. It made me sick, retching sick.

I MUST have passed out again then for a goodish while, and what brought me to was the noise Lane was making. He wasn't talking; only sort of whimpering to himself, but our faces were so close it sounded loud to me. His eyes were shut, but when I told him to stow his noise, they came wide open. He thought I was dead already, I guess, and to hear me talk surprised him. I asked him if he could climb back over the rail but he said he was too weak for it. So I tried; but it weren't no go. I'd lost too much blood and I couldn't move myself. And the pain in my arm when I tried was too much for me.

After that we just hung there, quiet, and looked at each other. And I tell you I don't want to see a face like that again if I can help it. So close and all— It was chronic. He'd turned a sort of mucky gray. And his mouth was all queer and twisted. And his eyes— I couldn't look at those eyes very long, so I shut mine.

We stayed that way for a long time, boys. I don't know how long, but it was a long time. The pain in my arm was bad enough but after a bit the thirst I got was worse. A whole lot worse. And there was the sun, too. It was shining down right on us. It burned like a fire, and hell couldn't be any worse than that was.

Yes. It was hell all right.

When the sun got down behind the house I opened my eyes again. Lane was crying. No noise with it—just shaking. And the shaking hurt my arm. I told him to stop it.

"Let *me* die quiet," I tells him, "if you can't. Are you frightened to die," I says, "or what?" I didn't think he'd answer, but he did.

"No," he says, almost as if he was sensible. "No. It's not death, it's *life* I'm frightened of . . . Life!" he says, and he groans out loud and horrid.

I didn't think he'd have had the strength to make all that noise. But that was all. After that he hung there quiet. Very quiet. He gritted his teeth every now and again and he kept on blinking his eyes. The flies began to gather then, thick . . .

You must have let go your hook pretty close in shore, boys. I thought I'd been dead a long time when I heard the rattle

of your chain running out. I knew what it was all right. There's no mistaking the noise of an anchor being let go—even if you are three parts dead. It brought me to again, anyhow. And Lane as well. He stares at me for a while, with his eyes all big. And then you eased out another fathom or two. We heard the chain clanking through the hawsepipe, and Lane kind of whispers in my ear as if he was telling me some sort of horrible secret.

"A ship!" he says.

I didn't say anything. I was wondering if any one'd come ashore. If you waited till the morning I knew you were going to come too late. I was listening to hear if you lowered a boat when all of a sudden Lane screams out so loud I wonder you didn't hear him.

"*No*," he shouts. "There's time—still." And with that he starts working with his free hand at my knife that was *still* sticking in him.

He tore it away and he tore at his side with his nails, and the blood started again . . .

That's all I remember about it, boys. I don't know any more until I found myself aboard here in this bunk. You say Lane's dead, and I tell you what—he's lucky. I'm not squealing; but I don't want to die. Not like this, anyhow; lying here rotting slow—and taking a week, maybe, before I've gone rotten all over.

That was Lane's trouble. *He* was rotten all through. I see it now. I've seen a light. He couldn't face it. He couldn't face life. And I called him a coward; but now, when it comes to the point, I can't face dying—so slow.

No, boys, I can't face it. So I guess I'll dodge it, too. I'll tell you what you've got to do for me. You'll have to fill me up with liquor, boys. Fill me up till I'm blind and speechless—and keep me that way. If you'll do that for me I think I ought, with luck, to pass out pretty easy.

I'll try it, anyway. Give me that bottle of rum—and if the liquor gives out before I do, boys, you'll have to loan me a gun . . .

A Story of the Teak Forests of Siam

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

BRAVE MAN, STRONG MAN

THE TEAK company, for which Edward Stranson worked as forest assistant, was one of the largest firms in northern Siam; consequently Stranson had under his care as many as one hundred elephants, together with a goodly supply of Lao mahouts and coolies.

In the main, the mahouts were a fearless crowd, given to much boasting and bravado; but the one exception to the rule was Ai Oop, who was undoubtedly a timid man. For this reason he rode the gentlest of all the female elephants on Stranson's force, wherefore the other mahouts scorned him greatly, and the coolies did likewise. They called Ai Oop a coward; they laughed at him; they cracked a thousand jokes at his expense, yet he endured it all philosophically enough until *she* came.

Thereafter he began to dream the most wonderful dreams. He saw himself proving his courage to all the world; he saw himself the mahout, not merely of an ordinary fierce elephant, but of Poo Kam, who was the very cream of all Edward Stranson's stock; and, finally, he dreamed that he carried off that little brown girl in triumph.

Now the girl was one Dok Mai Pa Deng, which, being interpreted, means flower of the forest. For the whole sixteen years of her life she had lived in the little native village near Stranson's camp, and with

each succeeding year her beauty had grown and grown, till by now that beauty had ripened from blossom to flower, and many were the suitors for her tiny brown hand.

First and foremost among them was Ai Kham, mahout of a fierce elephant named Poo Sen. Ai Kham was swarthy and bold of mien; nevertheless all his boasting, all his strength, all his bravery stirred not in the least the heart of the maiden. She remained outwardly cold to all men until she met—and here was what nobody could understand—until she met Ai Oop, the coward.

After that many were the times they walked together along the bank of the river that ran below the camp, but not one word of love passed between them until one gorgeous April evening, when the setting sun hung, a red ball of fire, over the purple swell of the rolling forest hills. The mellowing light rayed softly on her features, and Oop's color turned his brown cheeks to a dusky crimson.

"Flower of the Forest," he whispered softly, bending his dark head to hers, "if one day I became a great mahout, with a great mahout's pay, and the great Lord Stranson looked favorably upon me, I had thought that a little bamboo shanty with a real tin roof on might perhaps be made."

"It might," said the maiden guardedly.

"I had thought also that it might be made big enough for people—two persons."

"It might," repeated Flower again, stabbing one little bare toe into the ground.

Ai Oop gazed down at her. A scarlet hibiscus flamed in the dark tresses that coiled above the shapely head; her feet peeped out from beneath the *sinn* like fluttering birds; her beauty caught him at the heart and he flung discretion to the winds.

"Flower of the Forest," he said thickly, "the whole world is now one big flower to me, and you are that flower. Flower . . ." He was trembling with entreaty.

She raised her head. The sloe black eyes were dancing with the light that comes but once to the eyes of a woman, and the perfect little face was transfigured with happiness.

"You, my man," she whispered, stroking his cheek, "and you brave man, strong man."

At the words he swelled with pride, then a frown crossed his forehead.

"Flower, you wrong. You know I very frightened always, and all the camp they call me coward."

"Brave man, strong man," she repeated and, stooping, handed him a blossom. It was a tiny blue forest orchid, fragile and tender, the token of her love for him.

An hour later, the love token grasped between his fingers, he walked back to camp; but he trod not on the path, for his feet were in the clouds and his head in highest heaven. She loved him. She had called him a brave man, a strong man. He would be brave. He would conquer the fiercest elephant and thereby earn much money, all of which he would lay at her little feet.

Into the camp he strode. The coolies and mahouts saw his flushed, triumphant face and the token in his hand. They smiled incredulously, then shook their heads in resignation, telling themselves that the ways of women were exceeding strange.

One mahout, however, did not smile. Instead, Ai Kham stared long and fixedly at the ground, and his evil face was sullen.

THE FOLLOWING day Ai Kham was in one of his blackest moods, and proceeded to vent his wrath on the first living creature that came to hand, namely Poo Sen. Now Poo Sen, though of small size and stature, was a vicious, wicked little brute, gifted with strange mannerisms. For weeks on end he would remain quiet, and then for no particular reason he would indulge in the most insensate rages. He would bellow, shaking his head so violently that the rider fell off; he would chase any human being that came across

his path. In short, he would make a thorough nuisance of himself.

Today, however, in spite of the vicious prods of Ai Kham's iron goad upon his forehead, he dragged log after log of heavy teak in a manner becoming the most gentle of elephants, and it was not until the midday heat had set in that trouble began.

Ai Kham, his mind still brooding on Ai Oop, was guilty of carelessly tying the hobbles round Poo Sen's feet, with the result that the elephant, left to graze undisturbed during the hottest part of the afternoon, promptly kicked off the chains as soon as the mahout had disappeared.

Finding himself free, Poo Sen decided upon one of his best rages. He therefore swung along through the forest at a fast shuffle, and shortly burst out on the river bank at a spot close to Stranson's camp. Three coolies, happily fishing, vanished with extraordinary rapidity, and by the time the camp had been thoroughly aroused Poo Sen, having satisfied his rage for the moment, plunged into the thickest part of the jungle and was lost.

Evening found him still at large, and at Stranson's directions the mahout Ai Kham was ordered to leave at dawn the following morning and search the forest for him.

"Brave man, strong man," whispered Flower to Ai Oop as they strolled along the river's edge that evening, "I have heard it said that the elephant Poo Sen, which is exceeding fierce, has escaped."

"He has," said Ai Oop.

"I had thought—" whispered the maiden, and broke off significantly.

The mahout swallowed hard, for here was the chance to show his bravery at last.

"Flower," he said sturdily, throwing out his chest, "tomorrow I leave at dawn. I find Poo Sen first before Ai Kham. I tame him. I bring him back."

She smiled up at him, and he struck an attitude. He, the coward, would now without doubt prove himself worthy to be a fierce elephant rider, and the Lord Stranson would promote him.

Visions came to him. Visions of Flower, of the little shanty with the real tin roof, of fat naked children rolling gleefully in the dust.

He pressed the maiden's hand, and night—the soft, scented night of the tropics—fell over the lad like a magic coverlet.

At dawn the two men left on their quest. Though the trail left by Poo Sen was invisible to any white man's eye, the natives eventually found it, then followed it up for mile after mile. They went at a tireless lope through the quiet forest maze, and neither spoke a word, so intent were they on winning the race.

At four o'clock in the afternoon speculation as to the fate of the two men came to an abrupt end. Ai Kham, on foot, had returned to the camp.

Without a word to the others he crossed over to Stranson's tent and salaamed before it.

"Lord," said he, "I walk many miles, then I find Poo Sen in a clearing. For one whole hour I try to catch him, but he too fierce for me. Once indeed I climb upon his neck, but he *swai* me off. So I come back, Lord, and try again next day."

"And Ai Oop?" asked Stranson.

Ai Kham grinned maliciously.

"Ai Oop, master, he cower in the bushes, for when he see the elephant he fall down in fright. He pretend he hurt his leg, but I know that not so. Then he climb up a tree, and all the time I fight elephant he stay there."

"Then why has he not come back with you?"

"Lord, I think he afraid to come down from that tree with the elephant still near."

Stranson frowned, then dismissed Ai Kham, telling him to resume his efforts the following morning.

Back amidst the coolies and mahouts, Ai Kham enlarged upon the tale. Ai Oop was verily the greatest coward that ever had lived; and laughter, high, cackling, nasal laughter, rolled round the group until Flower of the Forest stole up. The color had mounted in her cheeks and her

dark eyes flashed fire. She pointed to Ai Kham.

"Ai Kham," said she, "is a dog and a coward."

"Ai Kham is no coward," said the mahout sullenly.

"He is. He speaks evil things of a man who is not here to contradict them."

"Nevertheless, I have spoken the truth concerning Ai Oop."

"Is that the truth?" she said suddenly, pointing with dramatic effect to one side of the clearing.

ALL EYES followed the direction of her finger, whereupon loud gasps of astonishment came from all. For, advancing through the mellowing light of the evening was none other than Poo Sen, and on his neck rode Ai Oop, mahout and coward.

A silence descended on the camp while the elephant rolled silently over the sward and, obedient to his rider's touch, halted before Stranson's tent.

"So," said the white man, looking up at the newcomers, "it would seem that some one has been lying. Ai Oop, tell us thy story."

"Master, things happen like this: I find elephant in clearing, and I reach there first, for Ai Kham, he hang back, being very much afraid. I go to catch Poo Sen, but fall over a log which I not see on the ground. My head hit a stone and I go dizzy. The world go black for maybe two, three minutes."

Ai Oop paused and fingered a large bump on his forehead with tender care before continuing.

"When the world go white again, master, I look up. I see Ai Kham go into clearing, and he look very fearful. The elephant chase him, and he run quickly away so that I not see him again. Then Poo Sen, he come for me. I stand up, though my leg hurt like hell. I seize a stick of bamboo and hit him hard on the part of the trunk that is tender. He squeal and try to kill me, but luckily he very small elephant. I hit him often, then he get tired and very much afraid of me, Ai Oop, so this time I go to him. He quiet now, so I ride him back, Lord, but now I very tired too. Also very dirty."

He looked it. His brown body was caked with muddy earth, his shoulders glistened with sweat and, in addition to his swollen forehead, a large jagged wound on his leg was evident. Ai Oop had obviously been in a battle, and Stranson resolved to give him a just reward. He accordingly promoted Oop to be mahout of Poo Sen and, as a punishment for carelessness and lying, reduced Ai Kham to be the rider of a tiny elephant just being trained to the howdah.

The rest of the camp heard this decision and applauded it. Without doubt love had bucked up Ai Oop and made him a man to be respected. They would therefore cultivate his friendship, they decided, and give Ai Kham the cold shoulder. Accordingly they spoke loudly to one another when Oop, having hobbled his elephant and bathed in the river, was preparing to meet his beloved. They said he was the greatest mahout in all the world, and that the earth shook beneath his tread. They said, also, a lot of other foolish things—so that he could overhear.

Flower, however, said nothing when she met him, but merely wept upon his shoulder.

The weeks passed and Poo Sen, with his new rider, remained a model of obedience. And the longer that he remained thus the more did the fame of Ai Oop increase. Men said that undoubtedly Oop had utterly conquered Poo Sen, and that he now possessed the sure touch that converts a fierce elephant into a quiet, hard working beast.

Poo Sen himself may have thought otherwise, of course. He may have thought that the hand of Ai Oop was gentler than the rough hand of Ai Kham, whom he feared and hated. He may also have thought, "I will wait. I will bide my time. I will let this new mahout of mine think that I fear him. Then I will get into a really good rage and kill him, as I can do if I become angry enough." He may have thought a great many strange things, for no one

can fathom the brain of an elephant.

Time went on uneventfully, the while Ai Oop saved and saved, and Ai Kham, sore under his skin, waited for signs of returning rage on the part of Poo Sen, when Ai Oop would once again be put to the test for every one to see.

At last, after two months had passed, Ai Kham decided that if the elephant would not become fierce of its own volition, steps must be taken . . . Choosing a Sunday afternoon, when every one was resting, he acted. Ai Oop was, he knew, walking somewhere in the forest with Flower; the Lord Stranson was dozing in his tent; the camp followers were all asleep, and any movement on his part would therefore go unnoticed.

Bending double, he stole softly through the jungle till he came to where Poo Sen was hobbled. He loosed the elephant and, after arming himself with a plentiful supply of stones, climbed the nearest tree. From this point of vantage he then proceeded to rain down missiles upon the broad back of Poo Sen with the object of thoroughly infuriating the animal.

He succeeded in a manner beyond his wildest dreams, for unknown to him the elephant had been contemplating a further display of rage before ever he arrived, and now the stones, which were sharp and pointed, soon transformed Poo Sen into a roaring demon, terrifying to behold.

He screamed, trumpeted, lunged at the tree, and finally, seeing he could not reach his tormentor, rushed blindly off through the forest, intent on killing any living thing that crossed his path. Chance took him to the clearing in which Edward Stranson's tent was set, and Stranson, on hearing a warning shout from a coolie, had barely time to escape before Poo Sen was on the canvas.

Soon the tent was torn to ribbons and the camp furniture reduced to matchwood, whereupon Poo Sen raised his head and glared around. Stranson, watching, unarmed and helpless from behind a tree, caught his breath as he saw the animal's eyes, for he knew that the blood lust was on the elephant, and that in all probability he had passed from the servitude of man forever. Neither bamboo nor pointed spears would tame him now; a rifle would be the only weapon capable of subduing him, and that, unfortunately, was lying somewhere within the ruins of the tent.

LUCK was with Stranson, however, for suddenly the elephant turned sharply, and without apparent reason disappeared at a fast shuffle down one of the paths that led inland from the river. He vanished from sight without flourishing a trumpet of any kind, traveling quietly, a towering, silent death.

And then did Edward Stranson galvanize into immediate action. He shouted to his *syce* to saddle his fastest pony, then rushed toward the wreckage of his tent. He fought desperately amidst the broken furniture and after a short delay unearthed his heavy rifle which he found, with a sob of relief, to have escaped any damage. Two minutes later, mounted on a wiry pony, he was galloping along the little trail that ran in and out between the towering forest trees.

The path led, he knew, to a small lake situated about a mile from the camp. The lake was thick with rushes, the haunt of myriads of water fowl, and was set in the midst of a large open space of sward. Natives from time to time were wont to visit the spot for the purpose of trapping birds, and Stranson, as he flung forward on his pony, prayed that no one might be there at this time, for the tread of an elephant being noiseless, any one might be caught unawares.

After a period of furious galloping he burst out into the clearing, to find Poo Sen had reached there just before him. He flung himself from the saddle and looked quickly around, and the scene flashed upon his mind like a lightning cinematograph. Running for her life, round the edge of the lake in the direction of the trees beyond, was a Lao girl; he saw the vivid flicker of her *sinn* against the dark green of the jungle. Standing full in the way of

the oncoming death was a mahout. It was Ai Oop, and he remained motionless, awaiting the animal's charge.

Stranson drew a deep breath and raised rifle to shoulder, the while his mind worked rapidly. Ai Oop was evidently sacrificing himself for the sake of the girl, but even should he run now, escape would be impossible. Behind the mahout lay the lake, deep, stagnant, filled with rushes. Should he attempt to cross the sward and gain a tree, the elephant would cut him off. The man was unarmed, and though he had tamed Poo Sen before, nothing living could quell the maddened creature now.

Thus reasoned Edward Stranson, who then took aim and fired. At the sting of the bullet on his quarter Poo Sen swung round and glared at his new enemy. For a second he stood as if carved in granite, then he bellowed and curled trunk over tusks prior to charging.

Stranson's lips curved grimly; he had now the target that he wanted. His rifle roared a second time and Poo Sen, shot through the brain, toppled over with a crash that literally shook the earth.

That evening the mahouts were assembled outside the hastily put up bamboo shanty that now served Stranson in lieu of a tent. Beyond them the chainmen and coolies were gathered, and their eyes were curious, for undoubtedly a palaver was in the air.

Presently the white man appeared, and his face was stern.

"Today," said he, "an elephant has died, and it has been evil work that has caused its death. Ai Kham, stand forth!"

The command rang through the camp, and Ai Kham, his face turning a delicate green, rose to his feet.

"It is thought," continued Stranson, "that there is cause for thee to have no love for Ai Oop, mahout of Poo Sen."

"Lord, I know naught of what you talk," said Kham sullenly.

"On the body of Poo Sen are certain marks," resumed the other. "These have I seen. They are marks caused by objects that are sharp, as if some one had been ill-treating Poo Sen. Now I have made inquiries to find that no one is aware of the doings of Ai Kham this afternoon."

"Master, I go fishing in the river."

"That is probably a lie. Whether it is or not, a devil has told me that Ai Kham is an evil man, therefore he leaves my service forever."

The mahout failed to meet his master's eye and without a word turned on his heel and disappeared into the dark gloom of the surrounding jungle.

"Ai Oop!"

Ai Oop stood up, and a hum of anticipation ran round the camp.

"In the matter of another elephant for thee," said the white man. "Now it appears to me that Ai Oop is a good mahout. It was not his fault that Poo Sen escaped, and when he did meet the elephant he faced him as a man should, without thought for his own life, but rather of another's."

A murmur of applause came from the listeners, and a faint movement sounded from without. Flower of the Forest had arrived from the adjoining village, and her dark eyes were softly bright.

"The mahout of Poo Kam," continued Stranson, "is now too old for work and returns to the village of his fathers. Ai Oop, from now on thou art the mahout of Poo Kam."

THE REST of the camp gaped with awe. Ai Oop, once coward and worthy only to ride the gentlest female elephant, was now mahout of Poo Kam himself. True, Poo Kam was not a fierce elephant, but his life was so valuable to the Great Company that only the best men were employed to ride him; consequently their pay was large and they were much honored. Romance, so the dusky Laos told themselves, had come, and they wriggled in pleased fashion on their heels.

Ai Oop drew himself to his full height and glanced round the assembly. He saw the steady gaze of Stranson fixed upon him; he saw the eyes of the coolies, chainmen and mahouts looking admiringly at

his person; and, lastly, he saw Flower of the Forest smiling from the trees.

The girl was his for the taking; he was the mahout of Poo Kam; his wildest dreams had come true and the hour of his greatest triumph was at hand.

In the fraction of a second he came to his resolve. He would make this triumph a real triumph and behave, as Edward Stranson had said, as a real man should.

"Lord," he said, speaking in clear, calm tones, "never will I be the mahout of Poo Kam, for I am no mahout, but a coward, a cur, the veriest pariah that ever slunk round a village garbage heap. Lord, I never tamed Poo Sen at all."

An amazed silence fell over the assembly following these words. Their jaws dropped and they gaped once more. Had they heard aright? Then they bent forward eagerly, for Ai Oop was speaking again. He told the whole miserable story with his hands clasped behind his back, in much the same manner as a child does when reciting a lesson. The tale was brief, to the point, and amounted to this:

Ai Kham had told the truth after all on that evening many weeks ago. He, Ai Oop, had indeed fallen down with fright on seeing the elephant, and thereafter, while Ai Kham was endeavoring to subdue it, he had remained hidden up a tree until the other had given up in disgust and returned to camp. He himself had then waited awhile, and finally descended from his perch and without daring to look behind fled for his life through the forest. In his mad panic he had tripped over a log and fallen sprawling, injuring his leg and striking his head on a stone on the ground. He had lain, semi-conscious, for what may have been several minutes, and when he came to he had found the elephant standing well nigh over him.

Such fear had then caught him that he was too paralyzed to move. Fear, real, soul shattering fear always took him like that, so he told his amazed audience. But then a strange thing had happened, for without doubt Poo Sen was a strange elephant. Those quick rages that he indulged in had by now passed; moreover he seemed very tired after the constant harrying of Ai Kham. Perhaps a yearning to get back to camp for his evening *tamarind* had assailed him. Whatever it was, Ai Oop had soon found that Poo Sen was ready for a truce. He had then seized his opportunity, ridden him back, and the rest his hearers already knew.

"And in the matter of today's happenings?" asked Stranson quietly when the other had come to an end.

"Lord," answered Ai Oop steadily, "today it was the same. When real fear take me, it take me with icy hands. Lord, I did not run away today because I could not run."

A low laugh ran round the onlookers, which was promptly stilled by one glance from Stranson.

Ai Oop spoke again.

"Lord, I go, like Ai Kham, forever. I no good as a mahout; I no good as anything at all."

With bent head he turned and walked across the clearing in the direction of the river, feeling, rather than seeing, the coolies and chainmen shrink from him as from a leper. As for Flower, he dared not meet her eyes.

He arrived at the river bank and walked up it a short distance, when he paused. Now the confession had been made, his high resolve had left him, and he felt bled white. Some jagged rocks below him, swirling in the river, attracted his attention. That would be an easy way out, he reflected. He took a step forward, toward the rim of the bank, when a soft footfall sounded behind, and he turned to see Ai Kham approaching.

"Ai Oop, dog and coward," snarled the other, brandishing a knife, "life for thee is over."

Ai Oop made no movement, but looked at the newcomer stupidly, listlessly, till gradually Ai Kham's harsh features paled and he put the knife back in his belt.

"*Meh*," he muttered, as he fled away into the forest, "him will I not kill, for he looks as a man who is dead already. Evil and devils are indeed abroad tonight."

ALONE once more, Ai Oop braced himself for the final act. Luck, however, seemed singularly against him, for even as he stooped for the plunge a strong hand grasped him by the shoulder and whirled him round.

"That," said Stranson sternly, "is the most cowardly thing of all."

The man remained in silent misery, and Stranson gazed sadly at the dark brown face.

"Tell me," he asked, "why did Ai Oop confess?"

"Lord, I hardly know. Perhaps it was your eyes, but suddenly a strange foolishness did come to me, and I felt glad that I tell all. But now I glad no more. I wish to leave life, for life is hard."

"It is hard," echoed Stranson, thrusting some money into the brown paw. "But life must be faced. Though never can you return to my camp, yet are there other ways of earning a living."

The mahout looked dully at the money, as if he scarcely understood its meaning.

"It all strange," he said at last. "I have everything. I have my girl, my great elephant, my good pay, then that foolishness come to me, and I lose everything. I do not understand."

"It is sometimes said," remarked the other, "that they who lose everything find everything. There is much life before thee yet, Ai Oop."

"Lord, I no good. I coward once, I coward now, I coward all time."

"Ai Oop," said Edward Stranson steadily, "thou art the bravest man I ever met in my life."

With that the white man turned and walked back to camp.

Some four months later Stranson was riding slowly through a lonely part of his forest, when he came to a little clearing made right in the heart of the jungle. The clearing was planted with tobacco, and in it was built a shanty with a real tin roof. At the sound of his pony's hoofs a head popped out of the building, and to his surprise Flower looked down at him—Flower of whom neither he nor any one in the camp had heard a word since that fateful night.

She came tripping down to him, and her little face was rosy with happiness.

"Flower of the Forest," said Stranson, leaning over the saddle, "what are you doing here in the depths of the forest, with wild animals all around?"

"Lord, I have a husband, who lives here," she replied demurely.

"And who may he be?"

"He is one Ai Oop, Lord."

"Ah," breathed Stranson significantly.

"Lord, it come about like this. That evening Ai Oop speak, I very sad. I run quickly home. I cry all night, as I think him still a coward. Then I think, when morning come, that he not so much coward after all. I think he strong man, brave man, since he tell all people that he very much afraid. So I search hard. I find him. We marry, then travel here. And now Ai Oop— Ah, he comes even now."

She broke off as a high, whining native song came rising and falling through the forest, and a moment later Ai Oop himself appeared. His broad shoulders were clad in a leopard skin, and his gait was free and fearless. On seeing Stranson he stopped and tapped his chest.

"Lord," he cried, in deep, decisive tones, "it is even as you said. I brave man, strong man indeed. I been thus since that night I confess, though why I do not understand. I kill leopard, tiger, many wild animals, for now I know not fear."

Flower glanced at the two men and her color rose.

"Yes, Lord," she said, addressing Stranson, "he brave man, strong man now." She hesitated, then added shyly, "He nearly as brave and strong as you are, Lord."

"Come on, Daisy," said Stranson a trifle gruffly, and put spurs to his little pony.

STREETS *of* FEAR

IT WAS held to be a subject of raucous wonder among Lance Cameron's sophisticated colleagues in the Blue Flag taxi garage how Lance had ever passed the mental test at the hack bureau when he went up for his license. In this they were not wholly sincere. Lancey was a right guy; he was a good hackman and a square team-mate with his day shift driver. But for all that he was not really of the city; he was not in the know; he was not, in a word, wise.

They wondered not that he had passed the physical examination. He was six feet two inches tall, and slender and rangy of build. His shoulders were widely square and his long arms almost awkwardly powerful. He was twenty-three years of age and looked to be a formidable antagonist in any manner of combat—which he was, indeed. His associates did not know of the hard rough and tumble wrestling that had been the diversion of his younger days, far from the city streets where he now dwelt.

Had Lancey possessed a temper they would have feared him. But his light blue eyes, under brows and unruly hair the color of soft, ripening cornsilk, were mild and amiable, and his broad mouth, beneath a thin, humorous nose and freckled face, was too constantly agrin with tolerant good nature. There was not a bit of guile in him anywhere.

Linda Bennett, cashier, office manager and daughter of old Morse Bennett, who owned the fleet of fifty-five Blue Flag taxicabs, called Lance over to the office window one afternoon. It was three o'clock, an hour before the day shift was due to come rolling in, and Lancey had been occupied for the past thirty minutes polishing the tall red gasoline pump beside the front door. Such industry in a driver, when even the lower castes of

A Novelette of the Sinister Cycle of an Underworld King. By WILLIAM CORCORAN

shifters and washers disdained the task, was unusual.

"Lancey," said Linda, "I don't quite get the idea." She leaned on her elbows over the cash counter, a light of amused perplexity in her large brown eyes.

"What idea, Miss Linda?"

"Your hanging around here half the day before shift time. What's the matter? Haven't you got a home any place?"

A pleased grin broke on Lancey's ample features.

"Sure I've got a home, Miss Linda, but it ain't nowhere near here. I have a home and a family out in Oklahoma."

"A family?" The brown eyes questioned sharply.

"Oh, yes. My ma and dad and some brothers and sisters. I'm the only one away from home."

"Been in New York long?"

"A year. I been drifting generally around the last five years."

"Know people in town? Been places?"

"Well, I know a few folks. And I guess I've seen most everything worth taking in."

There was a touch of wisdom in Linda's smile.

"So in desperation you've come to the point of hiding away in this joint to escape the social rush. That it, Lancey?"

"I don't know, Miss Linda—"

"Make it plain Linda."

"I don't know. There ain't no social rush, I guess. I don't mind hanging around here when there's no place special to go this time of day."

"—Linda."

"Yes—Linda."

A bustling, stout little man with a chauffeur's cap perched jauntily over one ear appeared at the window.

"Cash, Linda. Four pounds today. Nineteen dollars and forty cents and a hundred miles on the clock. I been

hacking for a fare-you-well, girl friend."

A sweet but subtly impersonal smile blossomed on Linda's ivory face.

"You sure have, Louie. Where you been chiseling all this?"

"Waterfront pirating, sweetheart. Any time you want me you'll find me where the money is." The bustling person, with a grease smeared smile on his round face, slapped Lance Cameron on the back. "Hello, big boy! How's the hacking? I hear you and the commissioner was out plastered together again last night."

Over Lancey's brown, freckled face spread a rueful flush. Once, during his second day on the job, he had driven a passenger half the length of the city, harassed the while by the discomforting thought that in some way or other he was doing something wrong. He was. He had forgotten to throw to recording position the metal flag on the taximeter. It was a common enough error among beginners. But his passenger, out of all the city's millions, happened to be Matt Tierney, deputy police commissioner in charge of the hack bureau, an official whose pet hate was hackmen caught cheating the public and their employers by driving "stick up". It took Lancey one bewildered and painful week to convince the commissioner of his innocent intent, and when he returned to duty the affair was not quickly forgotten in the Blue Flag garage.

"You leave big boy alone," Linda told the breezy one. "Big boy brought in five pounds last night; twenty-five dollars and two bits exactly."

"Say," returned the round faced driver disparagingly, "if I worked a single shift like this guy, twenty hours on the street, I'd have the United States Mint tied to my tire rack when I pulled in."

LANCEY smiled tolerantly. Linda sniffed as she counted the cash thrust in the window.

"There's plenty of cabs outside, Louie. Any time you want to take one on a single shift just let the old man know. He'll oblige."

"Yeh? Good hearted, ain't he, your old man?"

"The only good hearted guy around here," retorted Linda with finality, "is big boy Lancey Cameron, who for some unknown reason refrains from taking a sock at you bozos every time you sound off."

The bustling one retired from the window. Faintly astonished at such ardor, he stopped and looked back.

Jeez," he said to Lancey, "the girl friend's up in the air over something. It must be you. She sweet on you, big boy?"

"No," said Lancey. "Hell, no," he repeated. He tossed the oily waste he was carrying into a barrel nearby and walked to the rear of the garage.

Presently No. 090-111, Lancey's daily concern and means of livelihood, came rolling in the side door. It halted beside the gasoline pump just within the entrance, a pump, by the way, which Lancey had quite ignored in his efforts to brighten up the garage fixtures, possibly because the cash window was not within view from that point. The day driver of 090-111 climbed from the seat and lifted the motor hood. One of the shifters was ready with the gasoline hose, and gallons of fuel hissed into the empty tank. Another grimy helper replenished the crankcase oil supply. Lancey approached, pulling on his black chauffeur's cap.

"Hello, Dolan," he offered in greeting to his predecessor. "How's the hacking?"

"Lousy," the weary driver informed him succinctly.

"That so? What's your book today?"

"Two pounds. And listen. If anybody makes any cracks about why I ain't got twenty bucks instead of ten—"

"Hell, Dolan, I wouldn't do anything like that!"

"All right. But if you or anybody else does I'll sock them with this whole ton of junk, be damned if I don't!"

Dolan was a good hackman and a peppery one, and he had his lean days like every one else. This was one of them.

"Sure, I get you," soothed Lancey. "You go ahead and let me tend to the rig. I expect you had a hard day."

Dolan, a tattered, colorless coat trailing at his heels, surrendered the gasoline hose and wandered off to his locker, fiery fulminations against his lot sizzling in the air after him.

No. 090-111, groomed and revived, presently rolled out the front door of the Blue Flag garage with Lancey at the wheel. A pedestrian about to cross the sidewalk before the open entrance sprang wildly out of his tracks, and thereby escaped being soundly bumped by 090-111's front fender. Lancey, his eyes dazzled by a glimpse of Linda smiling in farewell through the cash window, swerved, caught his breath, and gave the irate pedestrian an abashed apology. Then he was gone down the avenue, stepping on the gas to keep pace with the speeding late afternoon traffic.

Lance Cameron was a fairly contented individual, as contentment goes. Some of the pioneer simplicity of his fathers was his. He looked forward to but few things of providence in this life, and was willing to labor mightily to earn them. A job, a task; one to keep him and his in security and comfort, one to render him a certain quiet pride in return for earnest work. A home, a place to tie to, to be responsible for. Affection, the friendship of men, the deep regard of those of blood tie, and the love of one woman.

The love of one woman! Silently, with the torments of uncertainty that afflict inarticulate people, he had looked on Linda Bennett and found her the one whose love he would cherish, could he ever attain it. She alone kept him in the great city and atoned for its appalling immensity, which otherwise would have driven him quickly away after his first experimental sortie into its clamorous and peaceless cañons. He stayed, full of marvel and liking for the city, for all of it was personified in Linda—Linda the brown eyed, the straight limbed, the shrewd tongued; Linda the laughing, desirable woman before whom he was so strangely abashed!

The Blue Flag garage was on the upper East Side, and it was Lancey's custom to hasten downtown for the evening migration homeward. He wasted no time looking for business on First Avenue above 59th Street. He reached 42nd, turned west, and at Lexington Avenue received his first hail. A Hebrew business man with a two-carat diamond stickpin wanted to be transported to an address in the garment center with all possible dispatch. Lancey obliged him. In his five months' service Lancey had become a very competent master of the wheel in traffic, even in that late afternoon jam which paralyzes New York every day at the close of business. He disposed of the cloak and suit merchant, and cruised down Seventh Avenue richer by a fifty cent fare and a quarter tip.

At 23rd Street an elderly woman with a shawl over her head timidly nodded as Lancey drew up at the curb. She had a bundle and a piece of paper with a penciled address. Her speech was unintelligible to Lancey, but the street and number were plainly written, and he ferried the old lady through the crowded streets to a dingy tenement on Avenue B, across the town. Beaming with wistful gratitude, the quaint passenger paid him off at the destination. Lancey counted the dimes and nickels and pennies in his hand, and found the total short of the amount on the taximeter by twelve cents. He pocketed the money, helped the old lady with her bundle and left her in the tenement doorway with a grin and a salute to his cap. He said nothing of the shortage. She would not understand him and, counting that quarter tip, he was still thirteen cents to the good anyway.

Half a dozen other calls followed in quick succession, calls which kept him below 23rd Street until the gray fall twilight began to creep over the city. Then near Wall Street he picked up a man who rode to an upper Park Avenue address and contributed a dollar and a half to Lancey's book. Within two blocks another rider commandeered the cab for a dash diagonally across the city to catch a New Bedford boat at the Fall River Line pier at Fulton Street and North River. They

made the boat with two minutes to spare, and Lancey won a dollar tip above the one dollar and sixty cents fare. He was content to halt for a time and treat himself to a hearty supper at a lunch wagon on West Street.

It was early dark when he resumed his quest for business. The financial district was now deserted; there remained the choice of traveling uptown empty or ranging over the East Side. Lancey chose the latter and left the Hudson behind at Canal Street. In a short time he reached the Bowery, that soiled mendicant of Manhattan streets, and at the corner where Hester Street intersects it, spied a hand beckoning from the sidewalk. He cut the wheel and drew up at the spot.

A HEAVY set man with a nose that once had been broken and incompetently set placed one foot on the running board and peered at Lancey. Behind him stood two slight, impassive Chinese in cheap and shapeless Occidental garb.

"Want a good ride, brother?" the man asked.

"Sure," said Lancey.

"Well, we want somebody that knows the game. Cowboys and schoolboys barred." He paused, studying Lancey. "We want somebody that's looking for a really good ride."

Lancey eyed the man more attentively. He saw a smile that broke genially over strong white teeth and small, keenly blue eyes dancing with odd alertness.

"I'm looking for riders," assured Lancey. "This is a good bus and I can handle it."

"O. K. I guess you'll do, brother. All right, let's go."

The man laughed, deep in his chest. Lancey laughed obligingly and reached inside the cab to open the door. The two Chinese entered, their faces like masks, and the broken nosed man followed. Through the window he gave his order.

"Over the Brooklyn Bridge, brother, and I'll tell you where to go on the other side."

Lancey, a line of uncritical wonder over his sandy brows, threw the shift lever into speed and headed down the Bowery to the bridge.

The directions which issued from the interior of the cab, after they had completed their flight over the shimmering waters of the East River, were complicated. Lancey, in common with most Manhattan drivers, was familiar with little more than the main channels of traffic in Brooklyn, and he was grateful that this man knew exactly where he wanted to go. The cab headed southward, through the quiet old settlement on Columbia Heights, and rolled along Henry Street into the growing life and squalor of the Red Hook section, home of longshoremen and haunt of strange, foreign seamen. At an intersection cornered with dingy brick tenements, where the faded street signs were too shadowed to be legible to Lancey's searching gaze, the passenger gave his final instructions.

"All right, brother. Take this corner to the right and keep going to the Basin. Stop at the first pier entrance you come to."

They drove on through the darkened, empty street and soon drew out before the string of old wharves where in other days the spars and masts of square rigged Indiamen had risen to the stars like a lace of delicate shadows draped across the harbor sky. A gate yawned darkly in the nearest pier, and in a tiny window adjoining a faint light glowed. Above, over the roof of the wharf, loomed the vague, enormous outline of a steamship.

"This gate here?" asked Lancey.

"O. K. Right here."

The man emerged from the cab as they stopped before the closed, dark gate. The two Chinese remained inside, engaged in a soft, lilting conversation. The white man left the taxi door open, and stepped up to the lighted window. A face peered out, a square face past middle age but not beyond suspicion and cupidity, to judge from the look it bore.

"Well, Jonesy, we're here at last," beamed the newcomer. "How's the wooden leg?"

"None of your business," growled the watchman. "Who's with you, Nagle?"

"Two friends of mine. You know them. You ought to."

"Where'd you get that cab?"

"None of your damn' business," retorted Nagle amiably. "I'll attend to those details. Shut up and open the gate."

"I'll open the gate when I'm good and ready," declared the old man vehemently. There was that in his tone which spoke of other days when men talked more softly in addressing him.

"All right, uncle; all right," soothed Nagle. "We're only wasting time. Open up."

The watchman disappeared and presently a small door alongside the main gate opened, disclosing a dimly lighted corridor. Old Jonesy, walking with a noticeable, ill tempered limp, led the way inside. Nagle paused in the doorway and beckoned with a jerk of his head.

"Come on, boys. Let's get started."

The slant eyed pair slithered out of the taxicab and followed Nagle out of sight into the interior of the pierhouse.

"Say," cried Lancey. "What do I do, stick around here? How long am I going to wait?"

Nagle's face appeared momentarily.

"What did I say on the other side, brother? Stick around and quit worrying. Didn't I tell you this was a good ride?"

"Yeh, I know you did."

"Well, you do just what we tell you to. The rest of the time sit tight and keep your mouth shut. O. K.?"

"Well—" said Lancey. "All right. I'm agreeable."

He shut off the engine and slumped down in the seat to a position of maximum comfort, content so long as the time clock in the meter ticked off the nickels for his greater enrichment. Nagle disappeared.

IT WAS probably ten minutes later that Lancey became aware of stealthy movement in the nearby shadows. The skulker was to the rear and out of sight. It could not be said that he made strenuous efforts to conceal his presence, yet certainly he made none calculated to advertise it. Lancey listened a moment to the sound of unhurried footsteps on worn cobbles and then turned lazily. A policeman, casually but noiselessly swinging his nightstick, was staring at him with interest.

"Evening," offered Lancey.

"Same to you," said the policeman. "Waiting for somebody?"

"Sure."

"Believe it or not," said the cop. "I suppose it's a trolley car?"

"Nope. Couple of guys that went inside a while ago."

"I see." The nightstick continued to swing in effortless gyrations. "Where you from?"

"New York. Uptown. Blue Flag hack."

"Where'd you pick up this ride?"

"Bowery and Hester." Lancey turned sidewise to get a better view of the officer. "Why, is there anything wrong with this ride?"

"No," the cop assured him. "No. I was just wondering if those guys paid you before they disappeared, that's all."

Lancey laughed, relieved.

"Oh, those guys are good for this little trip. I ain't worrying about that."

"Well, you know best," said the policeman. He grinned in friendly fashion, red cheeked and young and deep blue of eye. "Wish you luck, anyway."

And, still twirling the stick, he sauntered across the street. He continued slowly on his rounds as Lancey watched, trying the doors of small shops as he went, alternately vanishing and reappearing in successive patches of light beneath the street lamps. Presently he turned a corner was was gone.

The neighborhood was deserted again. Drab and unkempt and full of shadows, it was mysterious and even sinister. The sounds of the harbor echoed softly in the dark places, and from beyond the wharf came a subdued hiss of escaping steam, like the contented breathing of a levia-

than. A quarter of an hour passed slowly.

The broken nosed man emerged from the interior darkness of the pier. He was smoking a long cigar, and its glowing end was thrust upward at an aggressive angle. He stood in the doorway a moment, staring up and down the length of the waterfront street in a mood of suppressed excitement. Abruptly he moved from the entrance.

"O. K, boys. Shove it along."

The two Chinese scampered from the shelter of the pier. They carried burdens, loose burlap sacks weighted with angular, heavy freight. One opened the taxicab door, and they thrust the bags inside. The contents clattered dully, like buckets of lard or paint. The pair left their burdens and returned inside the pier.

"Nice night, eh, bud?" remarked Nagle. He thrust his hat back on his head and regarded the sky, seemingly more genial than ever.

"Yep," said Lancey.

"Damn' nice." He puffed on the cigar. "Was you ever at sea?" he asked.

"No, I never tried the sea."

"Well—it's no life at that," said Nagle. "It's a dog's life. But you do get to know the night and the sky like you never do in New York. Look at that sky. Ever stop to think about it? Ain't it a hell of a big proposition though?"

"It sure is," Lancey agreed willingly, finding nothing commonplace in this observation.

He stared at the clear, stupendous immensity of the starlit heavens, and a thought came to him of awesome, lonely prairie nights that stretched far back into the years. He was strangely touched, and wondered at this latest queer shift of mood his passenger displayed. He was about to speak when the two Orientals reappeared with more burlap bags, which they cast into the cab upon the others.

"All right, boys. That's all, isn't it?"

"Yes," said one of the pair. "No more inside."

"Good enough. Climb in."

Nagle was brisk and businesslike again, and as his henchmen entered the cab he followed. He followed as far as the runningboard, that is, and there, with his hand on the door, he remained. He went no farther because a voice was addressing him out of the shadows.

"Just a minute, fellow."

It was an easy, yet quite persuasive voice. Lancey recognized it. It was the young cop with the very deep blue eyes.

"Don't be in such a hurry, gents," the cop continued, advancing. "We don't have visitors often in this section, and I hate to see them rush off when they do come. That's it; just step back a bit till we get better acquainted."

The policeman halted beside the cab and gazed with serene irony on the broken nosed man. Nagle returned the stare unmoved. He looked amenable to the whim of the officer, yet subtly bore a promise of exceeding danger.

"We just been visiting some friends," he explained guardedly. "What's the matter; you looking for somebody?"

"Never can tell what you'll find once you start looking, can you?" responded the officer. "What's that you're taking along in the cab?"

Nagle made a conciliatory gesture.

"What the hell! If you want that, you got the goods on us, all right." He was making a frank appeal. "We was given a few presents by our friends and we took them along. There's a dozen bottles of Scotch in the cab."

"Oh, yeh? Scotch, eh? All the way from Shanghai."

"Yeh," grinned Nagle.

"Haul out one of those bags," ordered the cop.

Nagle spread his hands in a gesture of resignation and reached inside the cab. He lifted out one of the heavy sacks and lowered it gently to the cobblestones.

"There she is," he said.

The officer now swung his nightstick to his left hand. His right went behind his back. He bent over closer.

"Dump it out."

NAGLE knelt beside the burlap bag. He strove to untie the knotted twine which bound the mouth of the sack. Failing, he grunted with patient good nature and drew a jack-knife from his pocket. The blade severed the cord, and out on the smooth cobbles rolled the illicit contents of the shoddy bag. There were no bottles. These were cans, as their dull clatter had indicated. Round, dull tin cans without labels.

"Scotch," murmured the officer, "in cans, eh?"

"No," said Nagle, closing the jack-knife with a snap and returning it to his pocket. "No Scotch. Only two hundred grand in opium."

And his hand snapped from his pocket with a black automatic pistol in its grip. The gun spoke twice, viciously, spurting jets of hot orange at the bulk of the officer's body, which lurched and toppled under the impact of the bullets.

"On the gas!" snarled Nagle, swinging the gun on Lancey, who had leaped in a panic from the cab. He snatched up the cans and burlap sack and tossed them into the cab. Lancey, perforce, did as he was bidden. This was no time for heroics.

"My God!" he breathed. He could see the officer on the cobblestones, on hands and knees, groping, breathing with choking breath.

"Beat it!" shouted Nagle. "Step on it, damn' you!"

"But—but good God!" said Lancey. Look . . ."

"You'll look plenty, you skunk. I know a doublecross when I see it. Get going, or I'll leave you with him and take the wheel myself."

Lancey saw the hot inferno in the man's eyes, saw the blunt muzzle of the automatic thrust through the front window of the cab. He said nothing, but jerked the shift lever into speed; pressed the starter as he did so, and swung away from the huddled body at the pier gate in a racing curve. With throbbing motor the taxi fled into the night.

New York is a big town, but for all that the police, when forced to action, can throw a cordon about Manhattan Island which no fugitive dares ignore. There are rivers separating the city's boroughs and these rivers are crossed by bridges where traffic is slow and where officers trained to observation and aroused by a general alarm can scrutinize every car that passes. Plainclothesmen can patrol the tubes and subways, being especially watchful for furtive men with bundles. When the tocsin sounds for the manhunt, the underworld scurries swiftly to its warrens.

"Listen!" Nagle leaned through the front window. "Head north. Keep away from the bridges till you get through Greenpoint. Theater traffic is coming in from Long Island now on the Queensboro Bridge. We'll get across there."

"You show me where to go, and I'll go," said Lancey.

"I'll show you. Don't you forget for a minute that I will. Take it to the right at Union Street to Prospect Plaza and I'll keep you straight from there on."

Onward they went in speeding flight through the placid streets of Brooklyn. Past little neighborhood shops they raced, past flats, apartments, the stately homes of Prospect Heights. The cab circled the great arc of the Plaza, found Vanderbilt Avenue, zigzagged over to Washington, cut a staggered course all the way across the borough. It crept through the narrow, crowded streets of Greenpoint, sailed along the freer stretch of Manhattan Avenue, crossed Newtown Creek and entered the broad boulevards of Long Island City. Ahead the lights of the great Queensboro Bridge curved high in the night across the sky.

With racing motor the cab met and joined the sleek, swift traffic entering Manhattan. Lost in the purring stream of cars it swept off Queens Boulevard and up the bridge approach. Discreetly holding its place in line, it traveled over the rising highway of the great span, coasted where the gloomy half-lights of Welfare Island glowed far below, rolled down the

slope that poured a myriad cars into the city nightly. At the foot of the incline the cab jolted over the cobbles and car tracks of Second Avenue, uninterrupted by the traffic officer who ruled the crossing, and pressed on westward.

They were safely in the city, unobserved and unknown. Safe, that is, as far as they could tell. But the city, when need be, can bide its time.

Lancey drove downtown on Fifth Avenue. This was at Nagle's behest, who explained with grim humor:

"The time Nicky Arnstein gave himself up he rode down the Avenue through half the cops in New York, all lined up for a parade. And not a one spotted him. Well, we can be as bright as he was. Get over to Fifth and head downtown."

At no time were they interrupted during the entire journey. Soon they were close to their destination. At an intersection not far from the point where Lancey had picked up his passengers, Nagle directed him to drive slowly around the block. This reconnaissance being satisfactory, the cab drew up before a small building sandwiched between scarred and ugly tenements. The small building, fifty years before, had probably been a very respectable livery stable. Now its character was no longer recognizable, except to the extent that it looked rather unsavory.

Nagle pulled himself out of the taxi, stretched comfortably and leaned against it with one foot on the running board.

"Go ahead, boys. Everything clear so far."

He was looking at Lancey with a peculiar grin. The waiting Chinese came to life and scurried through the cab door with their bundles. The wide door of the ex-stable slid open on oiled grooves as they approached, and they disappeared. A small man in vest and shirtsleeves was vaguely outlined in the dark entrance. He stepped aside as the Orientals hurried out for the remainder of the contraband, and when they had carried inside the last of it, he hesitated a moment, peering out at Nagle, and then pushed the door almost completely shut.

Meantime, Nagle, his right hand in his coat pocket, where the obscure outlines of the automatic were visible, watched everything out of the corners of his small, keenly blue eyes; watched his henchmen, watched Lancey sitting mutely at the wheel, watched the teeming life, which, ignoring them, went its way cheerfully up and down this East Side street.

When the opium was all safely disposed in the small building and the door had closed behind its attendants, Nagle spoke.

"Listen, brother," he said quietly to Lancey. "There's something I want to know."

"Yes?"

"Tell me, very carefully, what you know about that cop being on hand at the pier."

It was a crucial moment. Lancey, though this man baffled him, understood clearly the simple menace of his words.

"I don't know anything about him being at the pier," said Lancey. Precisely, without emotion, he narrated all that had happened in the few moments of Nagle's absence before the wharf gate.

"Yeh, I see," said Nagle.

SHE STARED at Lancey and his eyes were shrewd. He pondered. He considered himself a judge of men, and Lancey's story rang true. But there were other complications. The shooting of the cop had been regrettable but necessary—one of the exigencies of the racket. If the emergency had not risen, the driver of this cab would have remained ignorant of the nature of the ride. He would have been generously rewarded with a twenty dollar bill, in order to have him share slightly in the proceeds of the criminal act and through self-interest to seal his mouth. However, the emergency had appeared, and this sullen, gangling and apparently unsophisticated driver was an unknown quantity and a menace.

"All right, brother," Nagle finally granted.

He drew his hand from his coat pocket. From another pocket he abstracted a roll of bills. There was more money in the roll, in notes of large denomination, than Lancey had ever seen at one time before.

"You take this for your trouble, big boy," said Nagle, "and if you feel like it, buy yourself a nice long trip South for the winter." He peeled off and handed to Lancey a yellow backed one hundred dollar bill. "Do what you want with it, only take my advice and don't spend it all in one place." He grinned. "Here you are."

Lancey made no move; he simply stared.

"Nothing doing," he said. "I can't take that money."

"Why not? You earned it."

"I did not," said Lancey. Baffled wrath gathered within him. "Damn' you, you killed a man tonight with me along. I want nothing to do with it. You done enough already, didn't you? Pay me off on the meter and let me go."

"Oh, no I won't," laughed Nagle. "Pay you off and let you go squealing to the first cop you see, eh? No, you don't!" He leaned closer, his voice deadly. "You're in this whether you like it or not. You squeal on me and you'll be framed so quick and fast you won't get your breath back before you're up the river. You'll burn, you mutt. Burn, get me?"

Lancey could say nothing, his good humored mouth for once white and drawn.

"If anybody has to take a rap for this, you're going to be the goat," Nagle continued. "If any of us has to squat on the hot seat, you'll be the first. Figure it out. Nobody saw me but the cop, and he'll never talk. I can produce an alibi that I was playing cards in Max Levine's on Delancey Street from seven to midnight. I'll get six witnesses to testify to it." He tapped one finger on Lancey's knee. "But who's going to testify for you, big boy. Do you know who? I'll tell you. There'll be six other witnesses for you. They'll have different stories. One will tell you how he took the number of your cab as it raced away from the pier. Another will swear that you told him all about this job two days before. Another couple will say, if you happen to drag me in it, that they saw me pay you two grand in small bills in a speakeasy at five o'clock this afternoon. You're in it deep, big boy, and there's no way out. You ain't the first innocent cab driver that got in a jam."

"Do you think," said Lancey, "that I'm going to let them arrest me for murder without telling all I know?"

"Forget it!" jeered Nagle. "Jeez, forget all about it. What they going to arrest you for? Nobody saw you. I'm only telling you what's sure as hell to happen if you play squealer. You ain't dumb. You know how to stay healthy. Why that stuff we took off the ship tonight is worth two hundred and fifty grand anyway, almost a quarter million bucks, when it hits the street! Do you think we won't fight? This is a big time racket; too big for you to buck. Here, take the yard. It's yours."

He threw the folded hundred dollar bill on Lancey's lap. He stepped back from the cab, and stood, hands in coat pockets, rocking on heels and toes. The cigar jutted upward from his mouth and its tip glowed redly.

"Don't be a damn' fool all your life, brother," he said. He was smiling once more, as though admonishing a privileged subordinate. "Run along and forget you ever saw me."

Lancey thrust the money gingerly away in a pocket with the rest of his cash, and threw the motor into speed. He moved from the curb and drove slowly up the block between sidewalks bright with yellow gaslight from many shop windows and thronged with a bustling and unheeding humanity. The ride to Red Hook was ended . . .

For many blocks Lancey drove the taxi in something of a daze. He was staggered by the enormity of these events. They enmeshed him with vicious thoroughness, rendered him helpless and a prey to terror. He could see no possi-

bility of escape. He knew enough of criminal activity to be deeply impressed by Nagle's threats, and he knew, too, the swift, relentless vengeance of the police when one of their comrades has been struck down.

He flooded the motor with gasoline and sent the cab racing north on the city's avenues in wild flight. Panic took possession of him. He dreaded less the consequences of the crime than the possibility that he might be apprehended before certain necessary things were done. He must tell some one and learn what to do; and he must disclose this awful secret where it would not rebound to strike him down. There was only one person he knew in whom he could think of reposing such perfect trust. He must talk to Linda Bennett.

Then his bewildered mind thought of another contingency. He must provide a hiding place for himself. He could not continue to live in the furnished room which for months had been his home. The police would close off that refuge immediately his identity as the driver of the murder cab became known.

His identity! There was the immediate dread. Was he known? Had any one witnessed their flight and taken the number of the taxi license? There was no way of knowing—yet.

Lancey set a course for the old red brick house of faded respectability on upper Lexington Avenue where a hall room, third floor front, had long sheltered him and his few belongings.

No one interfered or questioned his departure, when he carried out into the night his old valise and battered trunk, hastily packed. His rent was paid two weeks in advance, so he was untroubled on that score. He loaded the things on the cab, and drove west, through the park. On Manhattan Avenue, in a row of quiet, solidly comfortable brownstone houses, he found what he sought. One dwelling advertised "Rooms" on a small sign at the door bell, visible in the light of a nearby street lamp. He applied there, was accepted by an innocent eyed, gentle voiced old lady who introduced herself as Mrs. Brown, and forthwith transferred his belongings to a great square room on the rear of the second floor. Now, at least, he had a haven—however brief might be its life.

Lancey proceeded to the next step in his immediate plans. He headed for the home garage. He took a devious route, wishing, with his empty cab, to lose himself in as much traffic as possible. And at the circle at 110th Street, where lies the northwest corner of Central Park, he was brought to a paralyzed stop by a hail from the sidewalk. It was a policemen in uniform who bade him halt.

"Where you heading, bud?" asked the cop. "Going my way?"

Lancey looked at the affable face of the officer. This, a mere request for a lift, had happened to him innumerable times. It seemed unbelievable now that a policeman should take only such a cursory interest in him.

"Why—" he said, "sure. Going east?"

"East it is," assured the cop. He stepped on the running board, and sat on the step beside Lancey. They drove on, while the officer in companionable fashion discoursed about the weather and the miseries of those whose work exposed them to it.

At Lexington Avenue Lancey drew up to the subway entrance at his passenger's direction. The cop eased out of the cab, and promptly a querulous, elderly gentleman of foreign origin, accompanied by his meek and timeworn spouse, commandeered the vehicle. Lancey hesitated with his hand on the door. The cop grinned congratulations, as though in some way responsible for this windfall. It was no windfall to Lancey, but the most evil luck. He smiled wanly and swung open the door. It was necessary to play the game. This cop must have no reason to remember him when the news ran like wildfire through the department in the morning.

The querulous elderly gentleman wished to go to an address in the far reaches of Fordham. He was impatient and full of

admonitions. Lancey started the cab in silent acknowledgment and proceeded in careful and impeccable fashion to convey his passengers to their distant goal. Outwardly he was taciturn, colorless, a competent nonentity. Within he was a soul beset with fear, in terror of the night.

IT WAS an hour and a half later before Lancey was able to return to his home neighborhood. It was late; the streets were quiet. Tardy loungers were gathered before drugstore windows on the corners as he drove down Second Avenue. He stopped the cab before a small cigar store in the middle of a block, and paused to light a reflective cigaret. Then he came out of the seat and went in the store to a phone booth. He called the number of the Blue Flag garage.

A voice answered. It was tense, restrained, he thought.

"Linda," he said. "It's me—Lancey Cameron."

"Yes," said the voice. "All right. Hold the wire."

Lancey waited. He was even more apprehensive for the lack of recognition, the strange command.

"Lancey," came the voice again, quick and earnest this time, "where are you?"

"Right close by." He described the site.

"Don't come in tonight," said Linda. "I just closed the door. Two bulls, detectives, are here, talking to dad outside. They're looking for you. What in God's name happened?"

"I got a ride," he explained, "to Brooklyn. They were smuggling opium. One of them shot a cop."

"You know them?"

"No. No! I will now, though."

The wire was silent a moment.

"Linda," said Lancey.

"Wait a minute. I'm thinking."

"I got to see you. I just got to, understand?"

Quickly then came the warning over the instrument.

"They're coming in. Beat it, kid."

The phone clicked as a hook was jiggled up and down, and presently Linda's voice, freighted with irritation, came over the wire, berating central for service of the grossest incompetence. Lancey hung up the receiver. On occasion Linda could be a good actress.

Lancey drove the cab uptown again after that. On 124th Street he stopped before a row of quiet, darkened houses. He got out, surveyed the vehicle inside and out to remove any possible sign of his recent tenure in the seat, and shut off the motor. Then he walked down the street to Lexington Avenue and around to the subway station at 125th Street. He was parting company with 090-111, perhaps forever, and there were at the moment too many other emotions in possession of him to leave room for regret.

Making a great circle via the 149th Street crosstown car, Lancey returned to his new home. With his latch key he admitted himself to the house unobserved. A small gas light burned in the hall, and he went to his room and, once there, to bed. But he did not sleep. The windows of the room were oblong patches of gray before he slept, and his hot eyes carried into tormented dreams the vision of a young cop with very deep blue gaze, groping on hands and knees on the cobblestones and breathing with choking breath.

At breakfast, perched on a stool at a lunch counter on Columbus Avenue, Lancey read the first accounts of the shooting in the morning paper. The young cop was dead. He had died within an hour after the bullets tore their way through his flinching body. His account of the crime was brief and incoherent; more important than anything he said was the inscription on his notebook, bearing the numbers "090-111". This, he managed to inform the police sergeant who came upon him dying at the wharf gate, was the number of the murder cab. The driver was now being traced.

The papers, piecing together what little was known and adding all that their fertile imaginations could concoct, described the affair as a master-stroke of dope

smuggling. The cans of opium estimated to be involved were rated at $300,000 in retail value. This, though exaggerated, verified for Lancey Nagle's boast of running a big time racket. As he read the story he felt of that slender crispness in his vest pocket. He could not think of any logical means of getting rid of the money, short of destroying it, and he wondered what the police would do, finding him in possession of such a bill. A counterman, busy wiping the long marble slab with an ancient rag, caught his eye with a professionally optimistic grin, and caused Lancey to experience a quick twinge of dread. He was unable now even to meet men's eyes.

The remaining details of the crime were scant in these early editions. The watchman at the pier gate had vanished; opinion was evenly divided whether he had fled or was a secret victim of the smugglers. The wharf superintendent was under arrest and stolidly protested his innocence. The steward of the ship and several of the Chinese crew were being held pending an investigation. Seldom had the police acted so thoroughly on so little information. Seldom, for that matter, are the police called upon to avenge the death of one of their number. On such occasions their work is exemplary or ferocious, depending on the point of view.

Lancey spent the day in the refuge of his room. He read again and again the news accounts of the murder; paced up and down the brief rug between bed and dresser; stared out the window; and wondered with increasingly agonized bewilderment what to do. He knew he could attempt nothing before he secured advice from some one. At noon he sallied forth, and after a lunch for which he had little taste, called the garage once more on the phone.

It was a man's voice that answered. Old Morse Bennett himself, aggressive, loud spoken, talking, Lancey knew, with a cigar jutting out of one corner of his mouth. Lancey replaced the receiver on the hook without offering a word of explanation, and fled to the solitary security of his room.

By the end of the afternoon the confinement and suspense he was enduring became intolerable agony to Lancey. It was contrary to every instinct in his nature to hide away when danger threatened. No fear inspired him; rather the panic that every man must feel when the colossal forces of the law move against him. Back home he would have gone directly to the county sheriff had he become involved in trouble; the sheriff, a man who had known him since childhood, would have listened and counseled him and steered him out of the stormy bypaths he had no wish to tread. But the city police! He had heard men talk of their power, their secret rooms, their methods of persuasion. They were to him as impersonal and merciless as the night riders who sporadically visited justice on unpunished malefactors back home. They were as unknown as they were powerful, and hence sincerely to be feared.

And combined with them in unrighteous conspiracy were the equally mysterious, terrible forces of the underworld. Lancey, beating his aching head with clenched fist as though to jar it to inspired understanding, could see only the slowly constricting walls of a grim trap hemming him everywhere about.

He went forth at five o'clock, and made his way directly to a drug store telephone booth. He called the number again, holding one finger on the receiver hook ready to press it silently down. Far off the buzzing signal of the call sounded over the wire. It stopped midstride. A voice—

"Linda!" he whispered. "Linda, it's me again."

"Yes?"

That single word, so calm, so perfunctory! But Lancey, eager to sense things she could not utter, felt no dismay. He understood merely a warning, an admonition to brevity. Other ears were close by.

"Listen, Linda," he said, "can I see you?"

"Yes. When?" Oh, so casual, so disarming. A young girl receiving a telephone call, being neither too cordial nor yet too unfriendly.

"The Capitol Restaurant. You know it; near Columbus Circle. About half past seven?"

"All right. Surest thing you know. I'd love to."

"I'll be waiting for you. Goodby."

He listened a moment before hanging up. She was still talking, languid and laughing. But not for his benefit. He grinned, replaced the receiver, and was out of the store in a joyful bound. Down the avenue, somber under the soaring elevated structure, he strode. He had hours to wait, but he must move, act, do something. Anything but return to the unendurable confinement of his room.

The shadows of night grew longer over the city, and they brought with them a measure of strangely renewed hope to bestow on one who needed it very badly indeed . . .

At 7:15 Lancey selected a table far in the rear of the busy Capitol Restaurant. A column, faced with shining white tile and swollen widely with coats and wraps suspended from brass hooks, concealed him from the view of most of those in the large, brilliantly lighted eating place. By craning his head slightly he could keep watch on the door. He satisfied a businesslike waitress by ordering ham and eggs and coffee, and was left alone to his vigil.

At 7:35 the revolving doors swung into motion, and discharged the erect, firm figure he knew so well. Linda, arrayed in a tan coat with a touch of fox fur, her short chestnut hair creeping from under the edge of a small blue hat, stood for a second just within the entrance, her eyes sweeping the place for sign of Lancey. Her gaze met other eyes, vague masculine eyes into which sprang an instinctive, eager hope. But that hope died quickly as Linda started with obvious satisfaction for the far corner of the restaurant, where a tall young man stood waiting beside his table.

"WELL, big boy," she said, as she dropped into a chair adjoining, "you sure helped yourself to a mess of trouble, didn't you?" Her eyes were troubled.

"I guess I did," admitted Lancey. He was so delighted, so reassured, now that she had come to him, that he could scarcely conceive of the imminent presence of danger.

"Tell me about it," she said. She rested one elbow on the table and gazed into his eyes.

Lancey told her everything, describing each passenger he had carried that fatal afternoon. He told the story with many halting, careful asides, with backtracings to set right some detail at first passed over, with painstaking racking of memory to achieve a fair and exact narrative. He spoke of Nagle, of the two Chinese, of old Jonesy, without passion. He wished merely to describe a series of events in which he had no part, yet which most unhappily involved him. And when he had concluded, after a few further questions from Linda, he had given her a truly graphic account of the crime.

She pondered for some moments while he waited silently for her judgment.

"I'll tell you without making any bones about it, big boy," she said finally, "there's no mistake that you got into a real, man sized jam. If you go to the cops—"

"If I go to the cops! I can't go to the cops."

"Well, I wouldn't recommend it, after listening to them talk."

"I was in the station house once, our precinct house," he explained. "I was there with the sergeant's car that your dad fixed. They showed me around. They showed me the room where they take the prisoners to make them talk, the detectives' room. There was nothing in it, only a chair and a light, and a closet in a corner with lengths of rubber hose inside. They laughed and hefted the lengths of hose and told me what they did with them. They laughed while they told me. I didn't have anything to do with

that fellow Nagle, but would they believe me? They would not. Not until they'd made darn' sure. Not until they'd wrung the last word from me. Not until . . . I can't go to the cops with so much against me, Linda."

"All right, boy. We'll find some other way." Her hand touched his, and he clung to it.

"What do you think, Linda?" he asked. "How'll I get a break? I don't know this town. I got that hundred yet—"

"A hundred dollars is a great help. It could take you far away."

"Yes." There was no enthusiasm in the tone.

"Tell me, Lance Cameron. What makes you stick in this town? I used to think you hated it."

"I did for a while. But I guess I don't any more."

"How's that?"

"Well—" he looked down at his hands and a slow color mounted on his face—"I got kind of used to it, I guess. I can make a pretty good living. I have money in the bank. I've been satisfied."

"Oh!" There was an inflection of ageless wisdom in the way she said it. "I see, boy."

Then she did a thing unaccountable in Linda Bennett. She leaned over quickly and pressed a little kiss on his tanned neck, right below his left ear.

"You big kid!" she said. "You make me feel foolish."

And while he stared at her, his eyes wide and a queer look on his face, she briskly powdered her nose, critically inspecting the job in a microscopic mirror . . .

They called for a second cup of coffee after that and drank together solemnly. And they talked. There were possibilities to be investigated yet. Linda questioned him about Nagle, the stable, the Chinese, old Jonesy, the pier watchman. Her mind was hard at work and she seemed far from despairing.

"Now you listen to me and do what I tell you," she said. "I'm going to see the district attorney myself. I have a couple of things in mind, but that's the most important. If I can get him to promise to protect you, why you can give yourself up without a worry. Maybe we can even go over his head to the Federal district attorney. He'll be mighty interested in the dope angle. You leave it to me."

"That's fine," said Lancey, "but what about the witnesses Nagle said he'd get to testify against me?"

"Don't let them worry you yet. If we can get the D. A's office interested in our side, half the battle's won."

"Well . . ." Lancey was eager to believe, but not fully convinced. "Another thing. What can they do to you for protecting me instead of turning me in? What if the district attorney doesn't believe you?"

"He'd better," she said. "He won't get a thing out of me unless he takes it the way I want. And they don't use rubber hoses on women."

"Lord, I hope not!"

"Never. And listen here, mister man. You got enough to worry about with your own case. Don't go borrowing trouble."

"All right." He smiled. "Whatever you say. You're the boss."

"You just keep that in mind the next few days," she advised. "Remember that I'm pulling for you and that my dad has a few friends in this town. Keep under cover and call me at the office now and then. If I'm not there try again till you get me. We'll have it all settled before the end of the week."

There was peace in the soul of Lance Cameron. Linda was a well of strength, from which he drank and replenished himself. She leaned over the table and gazed at him, straight into his clear blue eyes. They were two young people who had never been drawn so closely together before, and they were conscious of a queer, thrilling sensation at the experience . . .

Lancey sallied forth from his room next morning with a feeling of great confidence, and even of a vague and completely new sort of content with the world. He bought two papers at a corner stand and, entering the Columbus Avenue lunch

room, ordered a hearty breakfast of oatmeal and sausages. Then he spread the papers on the counter.

From the front page of each paper his own image stared up at him with all the stiff, ghastly realism of a three-minute license photograph.

Lancey folded the newspapers in horror, and dared not even look about to see if he were observed, for fear that his agitation might betray him. The professionally sunny counterman glanced at him. But Lancey was just another customer to his unimaginative gaze. None of the other patrons of the place, when Lancey glanced sidewise at them, seemed to have observed him. He consumed his food hurriedly, leaving the papers unread, anxious only to flee back to his room.

Alone in his sanctuary, Lancey devoured the news accounts. They were meager, consisting mostly of rumors Lancey knew to be false, of interviews with various officials, including the mayor, and of a statement of known facts regarding the "murder cab" driver. He was alleged to have a previous record of offenses, not clearly described. Matt Tierney, deputy police commissioner in charge of the hack bureau, admitted that Lance Cameron had once been before him on charges, but refused to commit himself further.

The photograph used in the papers had been obtained from the bureau records, where one of each driver is deposited at the time of issue of license. There were earnest promises of swift action and swifter justice when the culprit was apprehended, promises voluntarily offered by every official even remotely connected with the case. Of the arrests previously made there was no word. Apparently one conspiracy of silence, at least, had successfully resisted the attentions of the police. And the reason was not hard to understand, for all the law's interest was concentrated on Lancey, and on him all their best efforts would be bent, if he came into their hands.

HUNGER drove forth into the streets a fear ridden man, late in the afternoon. Lancey knew he could not remain in his room indefinitely. He must have food—and news. So recklessly he bent his steps toward the avenue where the elevated trains roared intermittently high overhead. He sought a restaurant; a new one this time, for he could not bring himself to visit the little lunch room again.

Now if Lancey had been an individual of greater guile, this particular hour of the day would never have found him outside the safety of his room. If he considered the matter at all, he probably thought he had chosen the very best time for his sortie. But at four o'clock those policemen who have patrolled their beats all day are relieved by the force which rules till midnight. For a brief period, therefore, the streets are most securely guarded by the presence of two shifts, double the normal strength. And those who have been relieved crowd into the subways, the restaurants, the speakeasies, or wherever suits their immediate fancy. It is no time for a fugitive to be abroad.

Lancey found a sizable, inexpensive eating place after a short walk down the avenue and, entering, chose a table far to the rear. It was a site selected with an eye to the same features which obtained at his rendezvous last night. He ordered a meal and proceeded to devour it stolidly. He steeled himself to the task of preserving an air of outward composure.

There were a number of patrons in the place, despite the odd hour. None of them apparently paid him the least attention. None looked at all dangerous, unless it be the man who sat in shirtsleeves up forward in the restaurant. He was a large man with a very capable jaw and a placid gaze which roved incuriously over the restaurant. Lancey, mentally cataloguing every one, placed him as formidable but unmenacing.

Then the man rose from his seat and marched across the floor with water glass in hand. He was obviously bound for the

ice water faucets, which were situated very close to Lancey's table. Something about the man interested Lancey. He was unable to decide what it was.

The man stopped at the water supply. He stood there, drinking. His eyes looked over the edge of the glass straight at Lancey.

And then Lancey knew. The man's trousers were blue. His shoes were black and heavy soled. Lancey shot a glance back at the man's table, and there, suspended from hooks on the wall beside it, were a blue coat bearing a nickeled badge and a blue cap with a black vizor. The man who watched him over the rim of his glass was a policeman off duty, who, after the custom of policemen, had removed his coat and cap for comfort once his labors were over.

Lancey came to his feet. He picked up his dinner plate, placed his knife and fork carefully upon it, and walked to the rear of the restaurant, toward the varnished doors which led to the kitchens. His face was white but his bearing was composed, businesslike. No one could have declared, off hand, just what he was bent on doing, but he seemed to be quite assured about it himself.

"Just a minute, guy."

The man in the blue trousers came to life. No longer was his gaze placid and curious. He was moving swiftly, calling for Lancey to wait.

Lancey turned, and in the same motion swung the plate in his hand and sent it hurtling with desperate force straight for the very capable jaw advancing upon him. He saw the man in blue trousers dodge, and at the same time reach a hand in his back pocket. Lancey ran, and burst through the varnished doors heedless of consequences on the other side.

The kitchen was a maze of steam tables, ranges, boilers and sinks. The white clad staff stared at him in amazement. He saw a door in the rear on one side, and rushed through the odorous room for it. The door opened at his touch and revealed a flight of steps and black darkness below. Lancey shot down the greasy, worn steps one second ahead of a bullet which thudded into the timbers somewhere beside him. The shot made a magnificent noise in the low ceilinged kitchen.

Lancey was drawn to a thin erect line of daylight showing across the dark cellar, and he plunged toward it over the concrete floor. No obstacle impeded his progress. The thin line of daylight showed between twin doors which were open on a crack. They swung easily at his touch, disclosing a flight of stone steps. Above was the street. On either side were concrete shelves on which reposed great galvanized iron barrels of garbage and refuse.

Lancey's next act was a combination of inspiration and luck. The cellar doors, it will be noted, opened outward only. Lancey swept the doors shut, ran up two steps, heaved a garbage barrel from its place and dumped it at the foot of the stone staircase. It fell fairly, spilling its odorous contents, and the barrel reached from the doorway to the bottommost of the flag steps. There is jammed. And while it remained there, no one would be able to force those doors open from inside, short of taking an ax to their wooden panels.

Lancey fled up the steps. The side street above was quiet, drowsing in the late afternoon sun. Lancey, with the preoccupation of one who is about to miss a train, set off up the street at a steady, loping run.

Cold sweat now stood in beads on his forehead. But Lancey did not know that. His heart pounded mightily within his breast. But Lancey was unaware of that too. All he knew at this moment was the necessity of gaining the corner up the block before the man in the blue trousers had time to retrace his steps and follow.

He arrived at the corner. There were shops and apartment houses and matrons and children and men about their daily tasks, men who had never seen a gun fired or looked on a fugitive wanted by the New York police. Better, there was a taxicab at the curb near by, with the metal flag on the meter announcing to all

the world that business was desired.

Lancey stepped into the cab.

"On the button to the 125th Street ferry," he ordered the driver. "If we make that boat I'll give you a buck tip."

The driver never before had been ordered to make any particular ferry out of the 125th Street slip, but he was uncritical. With an eye to the promised dollar he was galvanized to life. The taxi throbbed with abruptly started motor, leaped forward as the clutch caught, and shot up the avenue at reckless speed.

AND LANCEY, gazing backward through the rear window, grimly watched a big man in blue trousers come to a pounding halt on the corner just vacated. The big man had a pistol in his hand, and he was creating a great sensation among the matrons and children and delivery boys who dazedly tried to answer the questions he flung at them.

The result of these questions was never known to Lancey. In two minutes the street corner was out of sight and receding ever farther behind as the man at the wheel strove with might and main to earn an honest dollar.

When the tension of those few minutes was gone, Lancey wilted. He could do a thing like that once. He could do it again a second time. And perhaps a third. But could he go on indefinitely, watching, skulking, running, playing a grim, fruitless game of hide-and-seek with all the world? He endured the cold wave of desperation that swept over him, and clenched his fists and surrendered to another of anger. If he could fight! If the odds were fair and the game not stacked against him! If he could smash these knuckles into the grinning face of Nagle, and rush upon the cunning, silent pair who were his accomplices!

But he could do nothing. Not yet. He dismissed the taxi at 125th Street and, giving the puzzled driver the dollar tip his speed had merited if not earned, continued up the avenue afoot. It was a commonplace highway paved with cobbles that discouraged traffic and flanked with block after block of uninspiring tenements. Baby carriages in disordered clusters on the sidewalks, grocery stores with half their wares flung out beyond their doorsteps, young boys who raced yelling along the gutters in imminent peril of collision with a hundred obstacles; life, turbulent and sufficiently fed and adequately happy. It was but one self-satisfied and self-contained part of the monstrous city.

Lancey, preoccupied as he was, began to take note of his surroundings. Many times he had driven along here, but never had he made close acquaintance. Walking ever northward in unconscious flight from the scene of his discovery, he observed the houses, the cheerful, buxom women, the children, the merchants and clerks who seemed so content to be earning their livelihood thus close to home. He speculated on their lives, and wondered—he who had been born where the prairie landscape stretched through infinite distances to meet the sky—if the city were a place of confinement to them, or if for them too it held a secret magic.

He almost forgot the dread that abided with him as he walked along the avenue. Almost, but not quite. His eye was quick to detect blocks ahead the dark blue uniform he must evade. A dozen times he turned about and retraced his steps some distance until he could cross the street to avoid the scrutiny of a patrolling officer.

At six o'clock Lancey went to a phone booth and called the garage. An unknown voice answered the call. Lancey quietly hung up and went on.

For hours Lancey paced the flagstone sidewalks of the city. At least once each hour he called the garage. And each time he replaced the receiver in the same manner. Linda was not there. She had promised to be on hand, and only something serious could make her break that promise. What could it be? Lancey was able to provide no answer.

He was at first disturbed. But he continued his wandering exploration, for it afforded distraction. He avoided the

avenues of silks and furs and busy taxicabs, and entered the regions of the sedate and of the lowly. Through the tattered boulevards of the Bronx, the pleasant avenues of Fordham, the dark byways of Harlem, he traveled, each hour more worried, after each telephone call more harassed by an entirely new fear.

Midnight found Lancey downtown on the East Side. He had come here in response to an impulse that would not brook denial. He could not return to his room until he had word from Linda, and apparently there was to be no such word. All the assurance she had instilled in him last night was gone. To do something was essential, no matter how foolish or of what little consequence it was. He found the block where the little stable was located, and walked along until he was on the sidewalk opposite. He stopped and gazed at the dark, lifeless windows and gave way to earnest thought.

Presently he was across the street. He examined the door, and could find no bell anywhere. He raised his hand, hesitated, and then knocked on the wooden panel.

There was no response.

Lancey felt an edge added to his purpose by the fact that it was apparently thwarted so soon. He knocked more firmly, and taking hold of the door handle, shook the heavy portal so that it made a clamorous noise. This action secured results. A voice shouted from inside.

"Who's there? What the hell's the idea of the racket?"

"Open up," said Lancey. "I want to talk to you."

The man within made no effort to open the door.

"What do you mean you want to talk to me? Who are you?"

"Never mind. You don't know my name. I'll explain when I get in."

"The hell you will," assured the voice.

"Well, is Nagle there then?" asked Laney, by way of compromise.

"No."

"Where can I find him? I tell you I've got to see him."

The door now drew slightly open. A face peered out, a mere vague blot of white in the darkness.

"I don't know you," the man announced. "Why should I tell you where Nagle is?"

"I drive a cab for a living," said Lancey. "I drove Nagle the other night. He'll know me."

"Oh," said the man with sudden comprehension. "I see. Well, Nagle ain't here. You'll hardly ever find him here. But if you take a look in Max Levine's on Delancey Street you'll very likely find him. He hangs out there lots of times."

"Max Levine's? Where on Delancey is that?"

The man told him. Lancey remembered now that Nagle had mentioned the place in their brief conversation before the stable that night. He thanked the man in the dark doorway, and set out promptly to find the rendezvous.

Max Levine's proved to be a restaurant set down a few steps from the sidewalk on busy Delancey Street, its interior hidden from outside view by a crowded display of cheeses, *wursts* and other exotic foodstuffs. It looked like any of a thousand similar establishments in the city, which prosperity had transformed from delicatessens into popular restaurants. Some remain simple neighborhood eating places, while others become renowned less for their food than for the class of trade they attract. Such a resort was Max Levine's.

The interior fittings were modern, with white topped tables about the floor and secluded booths along the walls. In the rear of the restaurant several of these booths were occupied. Lancey ignored the obsequious greeting of a waiter and walked back to survey those booths.

NAGLE sat on the leather cushioned bench in one of those farther back. It was a roomy nook, suitable for six people. Four other men sat at the table with him, and they were playing pinochle. Cigar smoke floated stringily in the air, and on

the table several trays were overflowing with ashes.

Nagle, dealing the cards, looked up as Lancey halted beside the table. He continued to deal, and when he was finished, looked up.

"Well? What are you doing down here?" he asked.

"I want to talk to you."

"Yeh?" He was arranging the cards in his hand. He moved them deliberately, showing no sign of concern or haste. Then abruptly he dropped the cards and edged reluctantly out of his seat.

"Sorry to bust up a hand, boys," he said. "I'll be with you in a couple of minutes."

He came out of the booth, nodded for Lancey to follow, and walked to a rear door of the restaurant. He strode casually, not bothering to look back to see if he was accompanied. He opened the door and held it for Lancey to pass after him.

They were in a hallway in which a small electric light glowed close to the ceiling. Oilcloth was on the floor, and worn stairs led to upper floors. Nagle turned suddenly on Lancey and fixed him with angry eyes.

"What's the idea? Didn't I tell you to forget you ever saw me?"

"You did, all right," agreed Lancey. "But that ain't as easy as it sounds. I don't need to explain either."

"What do you want?"

"Just this. I want to know where I stand, with all the cops in New York looking for me and my job gone. I want to be cleared on this."

"You do, eh?" Nagle reflected, hard of feature. He turned and mounted the stairs. "Come along with me."

They stopped at a door on the upper landing. Nagle rapped on the panels, and promptly a peephole opened. Even more promptly the door itself, with a shifting of bolts and locks, was drawn back. They entered a small barroom where half a dozen patrons stood with feet on the rail, drinking beer. Nagle led the way to another room beyond, dimly lighted, where they took possession of one of the tables which filled the place.

"Beers," Nagle told the bartender, and they were left alone in the empty room.

"Now we'll get down to cases," he said to Lancey. "I don't want to see you; I don't want to talk to you; but we'll let it go this once. What are you looking for?"

"What I said. To be cleared."

"How do you expect me to clear you?"

"I don't know," admitted Lancey. "You're the guy that knows so much about those things. That's why I came to you."

"You're a smart guy, ain't you?" said Nagle. Suspicion was ugly on his mouth. "You know what happens to smart guys, don't you?"

Lancey was beginning to feel a tension creep over him.

"I know what will happen to any sap who takes what you give him," he said. "I don't give a damn about what you did. I don't like it, but I've got to look out for myself first and let the cops take care of their own jobs. I won't squeal. But being hounded for murder is something different from just keeping my mouth shut. Something's bound to happen, and it may be something you won't like. I just thought I'd let you know, and see what you're going to do about it."

Lancey knew that Nagle's gun was not far from a hand quick to shoot when obstacles presented themselves before him. He knew that a killing could be pulled off in this place and nothing ever said about it beyond the door outside. It took nerve to say that, even though it took greater nerve to drift on without coming to some conclusion.

"I'm not going to do anything," Nagle said. "But I'll tell you what you're going to do. You're going to blow the town. Tonight."

The bartender sauntered in with two glasses of foaming beer, and the conversation ceased until he had departed.

"No, I'm not," Lancey retorted. "I stay right here in town."

Nagle estimated the determination behind the words.

"All right," he said. "Stick around. But get this. If you peep a word about

what you know, I'll get you if I burn for it. Remember what happened to the witness in the Cipriano case; shot down on the witness stand in the Criminal Courts Building? Remember Joe Casey, found dead in his cell with a bullet in his neck? They got theirs for squealing. Nobody ever knew who gave it to them. But I know, see? And I'll know all about what happened to you when it happens. Now you know what I intend to do about you!"

Lancey breathed deeply.

"All right. You got me. You got me now, anyway. But if I die it won't be alone."

"No?" grinned Nagle. "Try it and see. Any time you want."

A man entered the room, a small man wearing a black shoddy coat edged with thin yellow piping, the badge of waiterdom. He came hurriedly to the table and spoke to Nagle.

"Boss says to tell you McPartland just came in downstairs."

"McPartland of Homicide?"

"Yeh."

Nagle jumped up.

"This way, you," he snapped at Lancey. "You got to take it on the lam."

He led Lancey, who was quite willing to follow, to a door at the far end of the room. Nagle turned the heavy lock and glanced outside through a peephole.

"All clear," he said. "This is another hallway. Beat it up to the roof and walk three or four houses over. You can go down any one of them. Nobody'll stop you. And when you hit the street keep going fast. I'll hold McPartland here a while with a little smart chatter."

And Lancey was alone in the dimly lighted hallway, facing a closed door.

He climbed the stairs to the roof, as directed. There he passed over four other roofs, all similar and separated by no more than a barrier of brick two feet high. He peered down a staircase at the fourth house into another shabby hall, this one gaslit and redolent of strong flavored food. He ventured below, encountered no one, and soon was on the street. None of the passers-by looked menacing, and he set out at a fast walk to the west.

Two hours after midnight Lancey was on Manhattan Avenue far uptown. He remained close to the building walls, hurrying past the pools of light that splashed over the pavement beneath the street lamps and moving with caution in the shadowy places. But the avenue was empty. He strode swiftly the last block and ran up the steps of his own dwelling. The key slid into the lock, clicked, and the door opened into the quiet hall. He was inside, safe . . .

A patrolman, swinging his heavy nightstick, strolled around the corner on Manhattan Avenue. He gazed over the darkened, sleeping houses, and reflected on the alarm that had aroused the precinct that afternoon when the "murder cab" driver was both found and lost again within its confines. He smiled with grim humor at the bawling out received by the officer who had permitted him to escape, and assured himself that such a thing never would have happened if he himself had chanced on the fugitive.

That shadow which for a moment had seemed to linger in the doorway in one of the brownstone houses along the block was gone. The patrolman walked by the house, saw nothing but a closed door and beyond it a dim, reassuring light, and decided that the shadow was merely imagination. Crossing the avenue, he disappeared up the next street. The stars were out, a chill wind was beginning to blow down from the north in advance of winter, and all was peaceful in his little world. A quiet night . . .

Next morning the storm broke.

To the city it was of no great moment, to be sure, this latest item of news in the murder cab case. The city was impatient and it cried for blood. The papers sought to supply it and chronicled the detention of one Linda Bennett, who had defied the district attorney and had been turned over to the police. But the apprehension of an unknown young woman who was merely alleged to have important information was small satisfaction. The killer

himself was wanted. The killer and his gang. This insignificant girl was a mere sop thrown to appease their hunger for action.

To Lancey it was madness. She had assured him they would not do this. She had laughed and said that they could not touch her. She had ordered him to forget and remain in safe hiding while she arranged everything comfortably with the district attorney. Lancey had expected that his own story would not be believed. But that they would not accept her overtures! It was incredible.

He paced the streets that morning, heedless of who might see his face. He tried desperately to think. He must think, must devise a plan, a means of immediate action. Linda was down there, somewhere in the somber cañons of the lower city, behind great walls of stone and iron bars. They were questioning her, plying her with infinite cunning and patience. They were threatening her, hurling abuse and blasphemy into her face. They were breaking her, slowly but surely. They were torturing her. They were . . .

"No!" cried Lancey. "By God, no!"

HE RAN through the doors of a small candy and cigar store and enclosed himself in a phone booth. He called the Blue Flag garage. A strange voice answered.

"Where's Morse Bennett?" demanded Lancey. "Get him on the wire."

"He just came in," assured the voice. "I'll get him."

Old Morse Bennett spoke, throaty, snarling into the transmitter.

"What do you want?"

"This is Lance Cameron talking."

"You!" said Bennett. His voice was dry and hard, like the crushing of grit between millstones. "You doublecrossing rat! Damn you, if I had my hands on you now!"

"Wait a minute, Morse! You better wait a minute. Save your cursing for some other time and tell me what's happened to Linda. How come she's down at headquarters without you getting her out?"

"Getting her out? You yellow sneak, you got her in! You got her in so deep I can't find anybody to spring her."

"They got no right to keep her," cried Lancey. "She didn't have no part in this."

"Listen here," breathed old Morse, "you're going to get her out. You—understand? You're going to do it right away, too. You get that?"

"Yes."

"Well, get it good and deep where you'll get it forever. If Linda is not home by twelve this noon I'm going to follow you every day of my life till I find you, and when I find you I'm going to shoot six holes in your yellow hide. That plain? You get it?"

"Morse, for God's sake—"

"Shut up, you lousy gutter rat! Get going; you haven't much time."

There was a heavy click in the receiver. Old Morse Bennett had delivered his orders. He had hung up.

Lancey went out of the little shop and continued his way along the avenue. He was heading downtown. Every step brought him nearer that place where Linda was held behind iron bars and great stone walls. What he would do when he arrived there was impossible to say. Surrender? Yes, if it would serve the purpose. Defy them? Yes, that too, if it would free Linda.

But if he could fight, instead of submitting; if he could break between his hands the complacent, grinning men who had trapped him so! If he could face Nagle once without his gun and his mob!

If he could smash his way into police headquarters and release her with his own hands, let come what may after that . . .

If he had a friend, just one powerful friend . . .

If he had a gun!

If he had anything but fear and ignorance and his own futile body against the enormous city!

But what had he said? A friend? . . . One man in a high place knew him well. One who could move things, who might believe him. There was Deputy Com-

missioner Matt Tierney of the hack bureau, who had investigated Lancey months ago and been persuaded of his innocence. Matt Tierney was a man both of understanding and power.

Into another corner store on the busy, unheeding avenue Lancey plunged into a phone booth. The hack bureau—calling the familiar number he had used months before.

"Commissioner Tierney, please. . . . Important business. . . . Yes, personal."

The commissioner's voice, gruff, direct, questioning.

"Commissioner, this is Lance Cameron. You remember me, I guess."

"Oh! Lance Cameron, eh? Sure, I remember you."

As though any one could forget the name emblazoned across every newspaper these two days!

"Listen, Commissioner. I didn't have anything to do with that murder."

"No? Well, I kind of suspected as much myself."

"But that's not the point, Commissioner. I want to say that Linda Bennett didn't have anything to do with it. Honest to God, she didn't! She didn't even have anything to do with me."

"She didn't? But that's not what she says herself."

"What did she say?"

"Well," Matt Tierney temporized, "she had damn' little to say at that, from what I'm told. But she says that she knows all about the murder, and that you gave her the information yourself."

"I did! Of course. But I mean before it happened. I hardly knew her. Commissioner, listen—"

"All right, that's just what I'm most keen to do; listen. Give me the dope in your own way. Let's have the whole story."

Lancey told him the story. But not the whole story. He told only his own part in it. He did not identify the man Nagle, nor did he give the address of the little old stable where the dope was delivered. To do that now would be to surrender himself too completely to the dubious mercies of the police and the certain vengeance of Nagle's mob.

Tierney prompted him with questions, made him repeat certain details twice, and was infinitely patient in his rôle of confessor. He tried by every argument to induce Lancey to supply names and places, where they were missing in the narrative, but failed. He did not seem to mind.

Lancey stopped not to wonder at the commissioner's patience. He ascribed it to official zeal. He had no way of knowing that at the very opening of their conversation Commissioner Tierney had drawn a blank pad across his desk and scribbled a message thereon:

> Trace this call. Flash alarm to precinct. Arrest. I'll hold him. Lance Cameron.

Nor did Lancey see the assistant who read the message snatch at another phone and set the swift machinery of the department in motion.

Through the wide city, traversing a tangle of endless cables deep under the pavements, darted silent, urgent electric vibrations. On scattered switchboards tiny colored bulbs began to flicker and glow, and buzzers to hum. Lines were plugged, other lines cut off and left lifeless. Words flashed across the city, quick, assured, potent. Soon a green light, high above the heads of passers-by on a certain street corner, glowed on and off, on and off, and a bell in a yellow iron box below rang insistently. A patrolman, idly walking his beat, saw the green light and hurried to the iron box, in which a telephone awaited his response . . .

"Listen here, lad," Matt Tierney was saying to Lancey, "why don't you come down here to my office now, and let's get the straight of it together. I'm with you, boy. I'm for you."

During an agonized minute Lancey felt the seduction of that cordial voice. It sounded so understanding, so tolerant. But then he remembered.

"No, I can't. I'm framed, Commissioner. You don't know. Maybe you'd believe me, but the others won't. A judge and jury wouldn't believe me against half

a dozen witnesses. I'm good and framed."

There was a pause, and then the voice of the police official changed. It cut like acid.

"Lance Cameron, I think you're yellow."

"Yellow, am I?" shouted Lancey, beside himself. "Yellow! All right, damn you, we'll see who's yellow. I'll show you. I'll show the whole lousy town who's yellow."

"I've heard them say that before."

"Well, you never heard this. I'm going down to a place that's been right under your noses Lord knows how long, and I'm going to fix it with the guys that got me into this. I can't fix it for myself, but I'll sure do it for this girl. It'll be fixed proper when I get through, and if you look in the papers tomorrow morning maybe you'll begin to learn something about this murder. Now go and pinch a couple of one armed peddlers for selling pencils without a license. Go and take a good healthy jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, you and the whole department!"

Bang! The receiver slammed in the hook. Lancey almost tore the door of the phone booth from its hinges as he emerged. He strode across the floor of the store to the entrance. He drew open the outer door just as a breathless policeman came pelting up. The officer looked questioningly at Lancey, and a gloating expression flickered over his face.

"I guess you're the guy I want," he said.

HE STEPPED forward. He should have stepped backward, hurriedly. But, for all his own training and alertness, he was given no chance to change his mind. Lancey's fist had doubled at sight of him; it swung at the sound of his voice. It wanted no incentive or explanation. It snapped upward in a terrible arc, and landed with the force of a pile driver earning its pay. The officer was hurled by the power of the blow upon a newsstand behind him. The stand overturned, scattering papers and magazines over the breadth of the sidewalk. The officer sprawled in the midst of the welter; his arms moved and his legs moved, but without cooperation with his brain. For the present he was out of the immediate proceedings entirely.

Lancey buttoned his coat, jammed his cap farther down on his head and set off at a run.

There come times when it is man's misfortune that he is a thinking animal. There come times too, fortunately, when he ceases to think. In Lancey's brain the cold, bright light of reason had dimmed. In its place the blazing fires of primordial wrath flamed high. He was cornered, and as an inscrutable Creator has taught all living things to do, he was prepared to strike, blindly if necessary, tellingly if possible, potently at all costs. Thus had he effaced the policeman from his path, responding to an impulse quicker than thought.

He ran two blocks, while behind him the lamentations of the newsdealer rose to the heavens. People he passed halted in their tracks and wondered. One or two set themselves as if to challenge Lancey's passage, but lost heart for the attempt as he drew near. He ignored them.

Toward Broadway he bent his steps, and down the subway stairs. A train was at the platform. He jammed a nickel in the turnstile and, rushing on, forced himself through a car door that has almost closed. The train jerked, pulled, and drew away from the station with gathering momentum, and soon was roaring through the underground arteries of the city at express speed.

At this early hour Max Levine's was practically deserted. Lancey barely expected to find Nagle or any of his gang on hand, but he would make certain first. He looked over the restaurant as he entered and, recognizing no one among the half dozen casual patrons, approached the cashier's desk. The cashier, a portly, managerial sort of person, was very vague about Nagle's whereabouts.

"He's never here in the mornings. Mostly you'll find him here at night only."

"Where does he live?"

"I should know where my customers live!" was the response, accompanied by an indifferent shrug of the shoulders.

"Well, where can I get in touch with him?"

"Listen," said the man patiently, "I run a restaurant and I mind my own business. If I knew I wouldn't tell you. I don't know anything and I can't tell you anything. So!"

Lancey was tempted to lay ungentle hands on the fold of flesh above the man's collar, just to see if that expression of arrogant indifference could change. He turned on his heel without a word and departed.

On the street of tenements the old brick stable basked in the morning sun between its two dingy, brownstone neighbors with the same air of lifeless decay. Housewives paraded by, carrying market baskets and babies. Itinerant peddlers pushed rickety carts of merchandise along the curb. In the doorways of every house on the block were gathered old men and young, maidens and grandmothers, infants and patriarchs, gossiping in the friendly new day. Only the doorway of the old brick stable was deserted, and the windows, opaque with the dust of years, empty.

Lancey knocked resoundingly on the wooden door. No one anywhere within would fail to hear this summons. More quickly than before came the response.

"Who's there?"

"Lance Cameron. Open up."

"For God's sake," complained the voice, "you back again?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, Nagle ain't here, nobody ain't here, and if you got any brains you'll beat it before anybody catches you here."

"Open that door or I'll open it myself," said Lancey.

The guardian of the stable reflected on this. Then the door opened sufficiently to enable him to peer out.

"What you looking for, friend? You know well what you'll get if you insist."

Lancey gripped the edge of the door and jerked it open another foot.

"Hey, what the hell?" cried the little man in fury. He retained his hold on the door and strove to draw it back.

Lancey broke the other's grip, and shoved him in the chest so that he went flying abruptly into the stable. Lancey followed and closed the door after him. As his vision became accustomed to the twilight of the interior he made out the little man standing a few feet inside, crouching on slightly bent knees. In his hand was a heavy caliber, nickel barreled revolver.

"What's your racket, friend? Spit it out."

"Put that away. Do you know where Nagle is?"

"Yeh, I know where Nagle is."

"Well, get him."

The little man studied his visitor. He cocked his head slightly to one side and grinned mirthlessly.

"You're a persistent bird, ain't you?" he asked. "Hold steady."

He advanced on Lancey, the revolver still trained on his middle. Lancey suffered him to run deft hands over his body in search of weapons. The little man seemed puzzled not to find any. He swung the pistol around by the trigger guard, caught it expertly in the palm of his hand, and slid the weapon to its resting place flat against his stomach in the grip of his waist belt. He wore no coat, but pulled his vest over the butt of the gun.

"Well," he said, "I ain't the one to stand in the way of anybody's choice of suicide. I'll call Nagle for you if that's the only thing'll make you happy."

"You do that," said Lancey. "I'll do the rest."

"All right. Come back here with me while I phone."

The little man led the way to the rear of the stable. They passed along a narrow aisle between stacks of wooden cases. Lancey observed that the place was filled with bottles, thousands of them in rows on the shelves that lined the walls and hundreds more in the piles of cases that rose to the ceiling. They were all empty and bore no labels. The stable looked like the

warehouse of a small wholesaler in glassware. From the dust that reposed on everything Lancey suspected that the stock was rarely disturbed. Yet it made excellent cover for any other operation that might be carried on from this place.

They entered a small office in the rear of the stable, where tiny windows high up admitted daylight. The office had a musty odor, redolent of long departed horses and leather harness and baled hay. The little man sat at a time scarred rolltop desk which, with a tall cabinet opposite, almost filled the room. He called a number on the telephone.

"Sweeney speaking," he announced when the call went through. "Is Dutch there? . . . Yeh, put him on, will you? . . . I don't care. Tell him I want to talk to him now. . . . Dutch? Sweeney. Got a guy here wants to see you. . . . Yeh, he says it's important. Friend of yours. You know. . . . All right, I get you. O.K. G'by!"

He replaced the receiver and turned to Lancey.

"HE SAYS make yourself at home. He'll be over in a couple of minutes." He relaxed in the swivel chair and bestowed upon Lancey a smile of sly and knowing humor. "I guess it must be important. I never knew Dutch Nagle to hurry himself for anything that wasn't. And he's sure making time now. Take a chair. Have a cigaret."

And the little man with ironic affability offered his visitor the sinister hospitality of the old stable.

For the next quarter of an hour Sweeney entertained Lancey with his racy conversation. It suited his fancy at first to deliver a dissertation on the wholesale bottle business, its difficulties and its rewards. At another time Lancey might have taken the little man's discourse seriously, for he seemed to know something of the subject and probably was at one time engaged in the trade. But now his familiarity with its details was too palpably a rôle well rehearsed and on tap for occasions requiring an alibi.

Lancey, since he was forced to wait, indulged his curiosity in another direction. He blew a reflective cloud of smoke into the air.

"How do you guys run this opium racket?" he asked. "Is that stuff we took off the boat the other night so valuable?"

"About a hundred bucks a pound as it stands," Sweeney stated readily. "When the fixers get through with it, it'll bring close to a grand a pound on the street."

"Fixers?"

"Yeh, the chemists. They make heroin and morphine. There's a couple of hundred decks of drugs in a pound of opium, along with some other things, and a deck peddles for anywhere from four bits to a couple of bucks on the street."

"Who peddles it?" asked Lancey.

"I'm dumb as hell about some things," said Sweeney, "and that's one of them. I'm paid to answer the phone and be on hand generally around here, and I don't know a thing about what happens outside. They park the stuff here a couple of days after each delivery and then take it away a can or two at a time. There ain't a grain of stuff in the house right now."

At that moment there was a disturbance at the front door, a tattoo beaten on the ancient panels. Sweeney jumped to his feet.

"Here's Dutch now," he said, and hurried out of the office. Lancey followed along the aisle of bottle cases.

Nagle edged through the opening when the little man unlocked the door. He cast a glance at Lancey and questioned Sweeney.

"Everything O. K?"

"Sure," said Sweeney. "You alone?"

"No."

Nagle made an abrupt, beckoning gesture. Outside a car was drawn up at the curb, and a door opened and two young men stepped out. They were stocky of build, quietly dressed, bland of face. They entered the stable, their eyes instantly seeking Lancey with an interest that betokened previous discussion of

which Lancey had been the subject.

"Step on it!" urged Nagle, and shut the door after them. Then he turned to Lancey. He took out a cigaret, touched a light to its tip and flicked the dead match aside, all without shifting his gaze.

"What's the idea this time?" he demanded.

Sweeney and the two young men drifted casually about. One sat on a chair and frankly stared at Lancey. Another studied a wall calendar. They formed an inconspicuous but effective ring about one who might require the attentions of such a formation. Lancey looked at them, and a grin, defiant and faintly ugly, came over his face as he addressed Nagle.

"I'm here on a different errand this time," he said. "I want something done, and you're the boy can do it and will do it."

"Oh, yeh?"

"Yes. Did you see the papers this morning?"

"What about them?"

"That girl they've arrested. I want her out today."

"Now, well, I'll be damned!" said Nagle with deep sarcasm. "Say, am I a nursemaid or something? Ain't I got anything else to do but keep you and your girl friends out of jail?"

"I let that sort of thing go last night," said Lancey. He was beginning to breathe deeply with the rising fury he must keep suppressed. "I'm game to stand my own troubles. But I'm not going to let that girl stand them for me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll answer that in a minute," countered Lancey. "First I want an answer from you. You claim you got pull and power in this town. Well, will you use it to get Linda Bennett out?"

"I will like hell!"

"All right, you skunk!" said Lancey. He jerked the folded one hundred dollar bill from his vest pocket. "We're quits. You can have this dirty money of yours. Take it!" He flung the hundred dollar bill into Nagle's face.

Nagle, alert, drew back and grated an order.

"Jump him! Hold him!" Nagle laughed.

Two of the bland young men were ready, and their attentions were quick and expert. They gripped Lancey's arms and held him. They met with no resistance.

"Cry for help, you yellow rat," shouted Lancey. "Bring along your huskies when you meet me, you imitation gunman. You need them, and you'll need them again the next time you see me."

Only Nagle's eyes revealed the vicious fury that was aroused within him. He did not surrender to it entirely. Lancey was a menace, the seriousness of which must be investigated.

"What are you holding out, you mutt? What's the racket? Come across!"

"I'm through. That's the racket. I'm through, get it?"

"You're damn' right you're through," said Nagle slowly. He made a sudden evil motion, and the barrel of his automatic was pressed into Lancey's stomach. "What have you done? How much have you squealed?"

"Plenty. I've left a trail a mile wide coming down here." Lancey, straining against the grip of the two guards, pressed his face close to Nagle's. "I gave you your chance, you cheap crook, and you passed it up. And you haven't got the guts to touch me, because you can guess without being told what will happen if you do. You wouldn't last till six tonight."

"Answer me," thundered Nagle. "How much have you squealed?"

"What would you give to know?"

"Not a damn' cent. I don't need to know. I'm going to smoke you, right where you live, you—"

LANCEY exploded like a pent-up volcano. There was real fear of death in what he did, but of nothing short of death. He jerked sidewise, bearing down so that his huge shoulder muscles pulled the two huskies off balance. He shook himself like a great dog while Nagle, taken by surprise but willing to bide his time, sprang back to watch with hot eyes. The two

guards struggled to hold Lancey, but nothing could hold him long. He swung one arm free and caught the unfortunate gangster squarely in the face with a slashing backhand blow.

Silently Lancey fought, while the two cursed in tense, angry grunts. Sweeney, to one side, put a hand to his gun, but Nagle motioned him away with the barrel of the automatic. He watched, waiting for the brutal punishment sure to follow.

Unfortunately for themselves, no one there knew Lancey's capacity not only for punishment but for berserk devastation. Blows fell on his head and face and he heeded them not. He flailed with his free fist until the other was free perforce also. He drew in his chin when an arm sought to encircle his neck and choke him, and reaching back for a grip on his assailant, he heaved forward and down and brought the fellow's body hurtling over his head to land with a sickening crash on the floor at his feet.

For a moment he had but one facing him. The man was boring in on him with vicious blows that sought the vulnerable places on his body rather than on his face. Lancey wasted no time sparring. He seized the tough, stocky body of the slugger and drew it close. Lancey was little more than an indifferent, if powerful, boxer, but his hands on the person of an opponent were cunning and strong and expertly cruel.

The young husky, snarling curses, welcomed the chance to grapple again. He tried to use his knee viciously, fighting the while for mastery of Lancey's hands. Lancey gave way. Then he thrust himself against the man, swung one quick hand behind the fellow's back, and caught the other's exposed chin in an iron grip. The young bruiser found his head snapped back abruptly so that his spine threatened to crack. He fought, but helplessly. His back bowed further and further. His breath choked in his throat.

Then, for one unexpected half second, he was free, completely free. Lancey had released his hold. The gangster sought to regain his balance. But even as he straightened up a terrific blow crashed on his chin, and he shot through the air to blank unconsciousness in a heap in one corner.

The other guard had found his feet. Lancey swung to meet him. The fellow had a bottle by the neck and was aiming it at Lancey's skull. It landed on his shoulder with paralyzing force and shattered as it struck. The fellow promptly thrust the jagged bottle neck at Lancey's throat. The razor-sharp glass slashed Lancey's cheek, and then Lancey seized the out-thrust wrist, turned abruptly about, and bent forward from the waist with the arm still in his grip over one shoulder. It was like a man heaving on a sack of grain. The young bruiser for the second time went over Lancey's head in sudden flight, and came to rest against a shelf of bottles which showered broken glass all about him.

Lancey was indulging in no careful strategy now. But the sight of little Sweeney dancing about out of range of the flailing fists gave him the inspiration he needed in order to survive. He threw himself on the surprised little man, snatching at the fearful hand Sweeney put out in defense, and swung him about like a wisp of hay. There was a crack that was audible through the room, and Sweeney screamed.

"Keep away!" Lancey snarled with heaving breath at Nagle. He faced the man now with a living shield between himself and that murderous gun.

"You won't get out of here alive, you stool pigeon," said Nagle.

"Won't I?" said Lancey. The little man squirmed madly in his arms, but Lancey was able to find the revolver in his victim's waist belt and to flash it forth.

"Don't shoot!" cried Sweeney. "My God, don't shoot. Dutch! Dutch, don't shoot me, for the love of God!"

"Won't I get out of here alive?" repeated Lancey. He could not bring the revolver to bear on Nagle because of the little man's terrified struggles. Clinging to him, he retreated into the aisle of bottle cases.

Nagle hesitated but briefly. The sight of his prey escaping goaded him to ruthless action. He tried to aim, and snapped a shot at the two figures writhing in the darkened alley of cases.

Lancey went backward, step by step. He could not tell where that bullet had gone; he only knew that he felt no wound. He saw Nagle close in on the aisle and fire a second shot, and again a third. The explosions spat darts of hot flame from the gun muzzle in the semi-dark, and the sharp echoes of the reports mingled with Sweeney's screams.

Then Lancey was at the door of the rear office. He flung himself inside, and was out of the line of fire. He dropped Sweeney to the floor, and with his gun hand free, sent a shot through the door into a shelf of bottles. The bullet smashed a wide swath through the glassware, and served warning outside that approach would be suicide.

Lancey swung shut the door of the office, and rolled the huge old desk across the room to finish up thunderously against the portal, blocking it effectively against sudden entry. He was, for the moment at least, in comparative safety. And most important, he was still unharmed.

On the floor Sweeney moaned and twisted with pain.

"Oh Jeez, he got me!" he said hoarsely. "May his soul burn, he got me. Oh, don't let me die like this!"

Lancey knelt beside the little man.

"You ain't through yet, old-timer. I'll get you out of here."

"Get me out of here some way. I don't want to die here. God, he got me! He'd shoot his own mother, and may he burn in hell for what he done to me today!"

The little man had a broken arm. In addition he was bleeding from two visible bullet wounds in his upper body. Lancey cursed the man who could mercilessly shoot down one of his own followers to get at an enemy. He straightened out the racked body as best he could, and left Sweeney.

The windows high up offered the only other exit from the tiny room. Lancey glanced over them, noted the iron bars which guarded the openings, observed further that the bars, which actually were flat iron straps, were imbedded only in wood, and leaped to action. He stepped on a chair, and from there climbed on top of the old wooden case which mounted to the edge of the windows at one side. The nearest window swung on a hinge, and Lancey drew it open. He was able to brace himself against the ceiling with sufficient solidity to attack the rusty iron bars with great kicks. He battered at them until sweat rolled from his forehead and the room shook with the force of the blows. But the rusty straps held.

"Fella! Here, fella."

Weakly little Sweeney was trying to attract his attention. Lancey paused.

"In the desk drawer. A jimmy."

Lancey dropped from his perch and jerked open the drawers of the desk. The second contained a miscellany of tools, among them a steel bar with edged end. He gripped it, and remounted the case.

There was no sound from the outer stable, no voices, no further firing . . .

The old window sill, unpainted and exposed to the rain and snow of years, could not resist the levered force exerted by the jimmy in Lancey's powerful hands. The wood gave, splintered and burst asunder. The bars were affixed to the inner wooden frame with heavy nails, but these too were easily jerked out. Lancey ripped the bars from the frame and cast them into the yard outside.

The way was open for escape.

Lancey had come here on a certain errand, and had failed. He was not greatly surprised. He had followed no certainty in venturing a second invasion of Nagle's territory; he had followed only an imperative need. Even now, though he got away whole, it was only to flee to what had been until this moment the greater danger. At least he could go to the police with clean hands, with no blood money in his pocket and with his status clear.

Nagle had asked for it, and by all the gods he was going to get it!

Lancey thrust a leg out on the window sill, the captured pistol in his belt, and heaved his big body after.

In the rear of the stable there was a concrete paved yard, surrounded by a high fence. Beyond the fence the crowded tenements of the neighborhood ran in unkempt rows, back to back a hundred feet apart, with a tangle of clothes lines stretching between. The windows of the houses were already beginning to be occupied by excited spectators. It seemed decidedly odd to Lancey that the fight inside could have attracted so much attention.

AND THEN, surveying the lay of the land in this strange backyard world, Lancey started and froze where he sat as he beheld Nagle below, close to the house wall where a cellar door was open, looking upward, with his gun pointed straight at his escaping victim.

"Well, big boy, we meet again, just like you said, eh?"

On Nagle's face was the crooked, cruelly affable smile with which he had greeted the young cop of the deep blue eyes. He raised the gun, holding it ever steady on its target. His arm stiffened. His gaze held Lancey's. There was doom in his eyes and a cold hatred that belied the smile, and the satisfaction of knowing that Lancey could not possibly attempt to bring his own gun into action without being riddled in the instant with bullets.

"So long, big boy," said Nagle softly, and drew his finger on the trigger.

There was a shot, unbelievably, from one side. Lancey saw a look containing the ultimate in incredulity appear on Nagle's face; saw the man drop his arm and lean foolishly against the wall. Lancey turned on his perch and beheld the head and arm of a man thrust over the wooden fence. In this man's hand was a .38 blue steel police revolver. He cried orders to others below out of sight, and was heaved up on the fence top. He dropped over into the yard, and ran to where Nagle was sliding, inch by inch, down the wall against which he leaned.

Then Nagle collapsed to a limp huddle on the concrete. No sound came from his throat as the newcomer snatched away the automatic and spoke to him. Only his eyes burned doggedly. In them were oaths that only his Maker would hear. And then they dimmed as his body twitched and was still. Dutch Nagle was through. Dutch Nagle, in fact, was dead, with the moorings of his iron heart torn asunder by one well placed bullet.

The man with the police revolver glanced up at Lancey.

"Get down out of there," he ordered.

"I'll be seeing you inside," said Lancey, and tumbled back out of sight.

Lancey withdrew from the window. His hands, curiously, had lost their sure strength and they trembled. His face felt cold and was damp to his touch, damp with more than blood. He sat for a moment on the edge of the tall case and tried to realize that these furious, incredible events had actually happened, that Nagle was no more, and that the police had him, Lancey, now, to do with as they willed.

As he dropped to the floor Lancey caught a glimpse of two more men coming over the backyard fence. In the outer stable there were voices and curt orders and the tinkling of shattered glass as men trod about. There was no fighting, once the door was broken in. The police were many, and the survivors of the gang were only two, battered and quite out of action.

Little Sweeney lay as Lancey had left him. Lancey stooped over the prostrate form. The little man's eyes stared at the ceiling with a strange wisdom in their depths. Lancey spoke to him, placed a hand on his breast. There was no reassuring murmur. Little Sweeney, too, was through. He had followed his boss.

The rolltop desk, responding to a pressure on the other side of the door, moved a few inches. The effort was redoubled, and the door swung partly open as the desk was shoved out of the way. A police-

man with drawn revolver pressed through the opening.

Lancey raised his hands to his shoulders.

"You win," he said. "I guess I've had my fill of fighting today."

And, sweat stained, spattered with blood, sore from physical punishment, Lance Cameron surrendered. . . .

Matt Tierney was among those who had attended the raid, and he took instant charge of Lancey. Red cheeked, solidly built, firm of mouth and erect of figure, Tierney was a fine type of officer. The outer stable was filled with detectives and police, and the sidewalk beyond crowded with gaping spectators, and the deputy commissioner's face, inscrutable and touched with a glint of humor, was a welcome sight to Lancey.

Tierney conferred with the inspector in command of the raiding force. He was leaving the two gangsters in the hands of the policemen, but would take Lance Cameron up to headquarters himself. A plainclothesman took up the rear as they departed, forcing their way through the excited crowd outside. They entered a sedan parked close to the stable door. The detective took the wheel while Tierney sat in the rear with his prisoner.

It was some minutes before Lancey could bring himself to speak. The deputy commissioner seemed content to address the detective in the front seat, uttering casual remarks oddly out of tune with the violent events they had just left behind. He ignored Lancey. But Lancey wanted to know something very much.

"Commissioner, can I ask a question?"

"Sure," conceded the official.

"Did you know I was in that place this morning?"

"It wasn't hard to guess."

"Well," said Lancey, "how did you know about the joint?"

"That was easy. Can't you answer it yourself?"

"No."

Tierney grinned.

"I simply phoned the commissioner himself that you were on your way to the hangout of the mob. The Bennett girl was at headquarters, I knew. And all they had to do was tell her what you were about to do, and she came across with everything she could tell. It didn't take a minute, once we made it plain that you probably would be bumped off within the hour unless we rescued you."

"I see," said Lancey. He reflected a moment. Then he had another pressing question. "Tell me, Commissioner, what was the idea of arresting Linda Bennett?"

"If you knew a little more about the police and the underworld you wouldn't ask that," assured Tierney. "To begin with, she wasn't under arrest. She was detained as a material witness. Once the news fellows got hold of that story and published it, her life wasn't worth a plugged nickel on the streets. We had to shut her up to save her life. She knew too much, and Dutch Nagle's mob was not particular how they protected themselves."

It certainly sounded plausible, once Lancey thought of it. There was only one question more.

"Commissioner," he said, "did you mean that when you said I was yellow?"

"I sure did." Matt Tierney chuckled. "But not the way you took it. I wanted to see if I couldn't jar you into some kind of a break before the cop I sent after you arrived where you were phoning. I had a hunch you wouldn't talk after the pinch was made. I jarred you a little too hard, I guess. But it worked out all right."

"Yes, it did," agreed Lancey dryly, "with two men dead."

"Hell," said Tierney, "they can be thankful, with the electric chair no doubt waiting for them up the river. The department has no regrets."

They drove on swiftly, ignoring the control lights, and speeding past traffic policemen who eyed the small blue sign on the windshield and saluted as they went by. Only that small blue sign, bearing a number and the magic "N. Y. P. D.", distinguished them from any party of citizens out riding in the family automobile. But that one distinction was potent.

On Center Street they threaded through leisurely drays and rumbling trucks, and presently arrived at the great stone pile which houses police headquarters. Leaving the car at the curb, they climbed out and went up the stone steps into the yawning entrance. A veteran of the force, serving out his years in a quiet post, saluted from the information desk. With Lancey between them, the two officers walked down a corridor and entered a spacious room. In the room were half a dozen desks, a table and many chairs. Three or four detectives glanced up curiously as they entered, but continued phoning and writing without comment.

"You wait here," said the commissioner.

He indicated a chair against one wall, and Lancey sat down. The plainclothesman drew up another chair and joined him, biting the end off a cigar and lighting it with relish.

"Well, we're here at last," he said companionably.

Lancey did not answer. He was watching, waiting, listening to every snatch of conversation about him. Despite his relief at the end of the ordeal, an inner chill at the power of these hard, implacable men oppressed his soul. For the moment they left him alone. But it was not their job to leave people alone, especially people who became involved in murders. He was free now to tell all he knew, certainly, but who would substantiate his story if the police still refused to believe? Nagle was dead; no confession of his would clear Lancey. The two Chinese and old Jonesy were gone, God knew where. The two huskies of the stable could, and undoubtedly would, deny any knowledge of the murder. And Sweeney, who might have spoken, had died the instant before he could have told what he knew. There was no one.

THE DOOR opened again. Matt Tierney, talking with one of the men at the desks, looked up. Lancey followed his gaze. In the doorway, staring with eager, urgent eyes, was Linda, escorted by a detective.

Lancey jumped to his feet. The detective at his side promptly leaped up also and caught his arm.

"Easy there. Time enough later."

Lancey remained on his feet, gazing at her. He wanted to shout aloud all the questions that tumbled one upon the other in his mind. But Matt Tierney drew a chair up to the table in the center of the room and gallantly offered it to the girl, allowing her no opportunity to approach Lancey. She gave Lancey a significant glance that was reassuring, and took the seat with sedate composure. Tierney leaned close to whisper something in her ear, and she laughed, looking up at him.

Lancey sat down again. Beyond a doubt Linda had fared as well in the hands of the police as any one could ask. She was undaunted, on friendly terms with them, and assuredly the victim of no terrible persecution. Lancey smiled as he caught her eye, trying to express all the delight that the sight of her gave him. He was satisfied that this weight, at least, was off his mind.

Minutes went by slowly. They were waiting for something, no doubt, but when Lancey inquired of the detective at his side what might be the object of their wait, the officer shrugged his shoulders and disclaimed any knowledge. Men passed through the room frequently, stopping at one or another desk to exchange a word, unimpressed by the presence of two prisoners.

Then the outer door opened again, and an astonishing sight met Lancey's gaze. In the portal stood Louie, the bustling, beaming taxi driver whom he had last seen before Linda's cash window on that fateful afternoon. Louie, portly and smiling with fatuous triumph, saluted both Linda and Lancey. To the girl he gave a signal of enthusiastic affirmation by nodding his head.

Behind Louie, as he held the door open, came two other men. One was plainly a detective, and his hand was firmly twisted in the coat sleeve of a grim faced man past middle age who walked with a perceptible

limp. The prisoner's eyes darted about the room with trapped fury.

"Jonesy!" said Lancey aloud. "Great God, it's old Jonesy!"

The gaze of the old man swept the place, lighted on Lancey, and there stopped. For long seconds he continued to stare. And meantime something happened within him. His face drooped. Much of the fire went out of his eyes. Defeat settled on his sparse shoulders. Old Jonesy, no longer the man of battle he once had been, seeing in Lancey a formidable witness against him, wearied of defiance and surrendered.

"Well, Jones," said Matt Tierney, standing squarely before the hard faced old man, "so we picked you up at last. Are you going to talk?"

"I'll talk," asserted Jonesy with grating voice. "I'm through. I'm an old man and I can't hold out much longer. I'll tell you anything I can."

"Who killed Patrolman Winters in front of the pier where you were watchman?"

"Nagle," said old Jonesy fiercely. "Dutch Nagle. Get him and you've got a dirty, sneaking crook with half a dozen murders behind him. He did it. I hadn't a hand in it myself, not a hand. And that young fellow over there will prove it!" Dramatically he pointed at Lancey.

"He will, eh?" said Tierney.

"He'll prove that Dutch Nagle fired the shots that killed your cop. He'll prove it and I'll prove it, and if you bring Dutch Nagle before me now I'll say it to his face."

"Well," said the deputy commissioner, "that's one detail that's not only impossible but unnecessary I guess, too. There are several matters still to be disposed of, the Federal charges and all, but the case of the murder of Patrolman Winters may as well be considered hereby officially closed."

Lancey came to his feet, with the words ringing a joyous pœn in his ears.

Louie, standing cap in hand near the door, grinned a little wider at that moment, and thrust out his chest a little bit farther. For Louie had pleased the "girl friend" beyond measure, he knew, and the fact that he had acted in the service of another man caused no rift to appear in his satisfaction. Louie, the demon hackman of the waterfronts, had at Linda's behest conducted a quiet inquiry into the whereabouts of old Jonesy at every tidewater speakeasy and lunchroom he knew; and with a disguise more effective than any a detective could adopt, that of a casual hackman, had ferreted out the old man in a ramshackle rooming house on South Street in lower Manhattan. It had taken guile and cunning and hours of vain wandering over the dingiest streets of the city, but Louie was equal to the task. He knew the waterfronts, and he knew that Linda would be pleased. And so it was done as she had asked. Simply to have done it was Louie's sufficient reward. . . .

They went up the avenues of the city later, Linda and Lancey, side by side in a cab. Their hands were joined together, fingers intertwined, as though seeking to cling to something tragically lost and most happily recovered. They spoke in sudden eager rushes of words, and then again were silent. And the sunlit streets of the city flew by all unaware.

"You were crazy! Goodness, you were crazy," she said, "to do such a thing!"

"Why shouldn't I be crazy?" he demanded earnestly. "After reading about your arrest in the papers."

"The papers were crazy too. Nobody was hurting me."

"How could I know? I couldn't stand it, I tell you. I had to do something."

"You could have told the police," she said, "and not go down there all alone."

"Well," he asserted, "you could have told the police yourself and made them release you."

"I did tell them. I told them plenty. They won't forget it in a hurry either."

She smiled with satisfaction as she remembered that morning, when she had been in the commissioner's office, closeted with the big chief himself. He was trying with patience and persistence to worm the story from her. She was adamant in re-

fusing a word more of information until Lancey was granted complete immunity, no matter what the testimony. This, for his own good reasons, the commissioner refused to do.

A phone call had interrupted their deadlock. Deputy Commissioner Tierney had important news for the chief, that Lance Cameron was at that moment on his way to tackle the opium gang single-handed. If that Bennett girl wanted to see him alive again, let her talk now and keep nothing back.

And when Linda was persuaded of the absolute truth of this news, she talked. There was no more reservations of any kind. Not even of discretion, for she expressed her opinion of the whole department in vigorous and unflattering language, and further singled out Matt Tierney for special consideration as just the type of complete idiot who would think that he could bluff anybody as straight and honest as Lance Cameron . . .

"Will your dad give me my job back?" Lancey next wanted to know.

"He better." She sniffed.

"Was my cab all right when they found it?"

"Sure, it was as good as new."

"Who's been driving it?"

"Only old Dolan, I expect."

"That's good," said Lancey. "He'd take care of it. Dolan's a good driver."

"Forget the old cab," said Linda. "I'm going to see if dad can't find you another job. Day manager, maybe. I want you around where I can keep an eye on you hereafter."

Lancey made no reply to this. But suddenly he cried out:

"Hey, driver! Step on it. On the button!"

"What's the rush?" demanded Linda.

"It's five minutes to twelve. Your dad said—"

"You are crazy!" said Linda. "Forget dad too. . . . And another thing, if you never rode in a cab with a girl before, you better begin learning right now."

He proceeded to begin learning.

"There," she said. "Better?"

Lancey smiled, widely, hugely.

"Sometimes when you're around I really am crazy, Linda. You can't realize how much."

"Well, tell me."

And so he did.

...on the floor it's

TIME!

Chester

FINE TURKISH and DOMESTIC tobaccos,

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TASTE *above everything*

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Not ordinary tobaccos, but tobaccos *chosen*, one by one, in all the leaf markets of the world, for flavor, richness, mildness . . . tobaccos matured and mellowed by *ageing*, in Nature's perfect way.

Not routine care, but tobaccos blended to scientific *balance*, to bring out the finer qualities that *make* a cigarette—and "cross-blended," the Chesterfield way, to round out and perfect the delicious flavor.

Chesterfield is much more than "something to smoke," just because each step is governed by taste, *above everything*. And long experience has taught us—and Chesterfield smokers as well—that a really fine cigarette can be made by no other rule.

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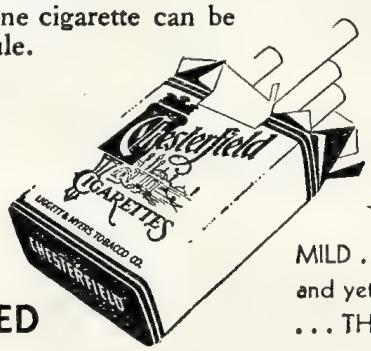
not only BLENDED but CROSS-BLENDED



MILD . . .
and yet
. . . THEY SATISFY

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

Why Humorists Have Dyspepsia

CHEER UP, Hank! There's one of yours in the September fifteenth number—and it's a mighty good tale, too. Probably there's nothing to blame save sheer coincidence, but we're stepping up the print order on that number. Tell all the bassoon-busters of Berwyn, won't you?

To the Comrades of Camp-Fire: Pull in here, lads, and let's have a confab. Throw a couple o' chunks on that fire, boys; that's it. Of course, what I'm spoutin' isn't the opinion of the editors of this-yere book of adventure. This is my own free air. The question before this assemblage is, what is this country coming to? Is the future American going to have a long pan, like a horse? Is he going to be a sitter who will take a straight backed chair and gaze gravely at his wife and his children and kick their heads off if they so much as crack their jaws open in a smile? And will the little woman pat him on the dome with a sashweight if he pulls a punk wheeze? It's a case of this matter of laughter. Do people want cheerfulness in their stories or do they continually want to read about the sufferings of other people? It seems that laughing is offensive; it will be classed with carrying concealed weapons and mayhem pretty soon, which, in Philadelphia is punishable by a year in jail and a $500 fine. Crack your pan open in Filly—or at one—and get a year in the can. We are beset on all sides by thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not drink such and such a per cent. of spirits of fermenticide, thou shalt not smile at a baby, and now, at last, thou shalt not laugh. A man in San Francisco got pinched and prosecuted for laughing in a theatre. Somehow, it seems, San Francisco owes it to the rest of a crêpe-hanging civilization to tell just what it was that caused a man to laugh so loud in a theatre that he was pinched and actually prosecuted. What's more, it ought to tell the cock-eyed and crêpe-hanging world *what* crêpe-hanger made the complaint. In my mind's eye, I have a picture of this bozo. A long, sharp chin, one eyebrow that scoots from left to right in an unbroken line across the nose, a beak

like a parrot; drinks wet and votes dry, and sings that well known Scotch melody, "I can't give you anything but dirty looks, kiddo".

Anyway, this bozo that got jugged for laughing told the court that he made his bread and beans fabricating caskets. All day long he worked at his ghoulish task of nailing crêpe into wooden kimonos; and, you'll admit, after a man has put in his quota of hours daily lining wooden overcoats, he needs relaxation. He said that that particular act that made him laugh so heartily was so funny to him that he just couldn't hold his said laughter.

I've been working around show shops for a quarter of a century and I surely would have loved to hear the gag that would make a man laugh hard enough to warrant calling the cops and the wagon. Still, it couldn't have been a gag about the coffin trade. If it had been, he would have yelled for the cops and screamed to high heaven that his trade was being libeled. How well you know. With iceless refrigeration in vogue, it couldn't have been a wheeze about an ice man; and, besides, the Ice Men's Crêpe-Hanging And Protective Union have had a law passed making it an offense, punishable by death, for any vodvil artist—I said artist—don't shoot—to whittle a wheeze about an ice man. Mebbe it was a mother-in-law joke; and those are protested by mother-in-laws. Can't by any stretch of the imagination, and I admit mine is very good, imagine what nature of wheeze would make this man laugh so hard. And the good Lord knows, I've heard every wheeze concocted in the minds of men, and all the 57 varieties of each and every separate wheeze. 57 is merely relative. Some have 57 x 57 varieties. It's really perplexing. What industry, club, race, color, nationality, clique, society, or what have you, is there left that has not made protest at having a wheeze whittled at its expense; say, only a little harmless quip that is pulled in the spirit of fun to take the drabness out of every day existence?

The incident proves the high quality of the laugh producing efforts of the San Francisco artists; they made a coffin maker laugh, but he should have known better. He's a silly chump, like the bird who is pounding this essay on his mirthless typewriter; the silly chump who thought the way to literary fame was to make people happy, keep them awake, and make them forget, if only for the moment, that tomorrow they again would have to grind out caskets, pianos, radios, spark plugs, hot dogs, and even magazines . . . And he was adjudged wrong. He has been told in no uncertain terms that he should, if he wants to pay the rent, hang crêpe, and make his characters suffer and suffer and suffer and suffer; and the more they suffer, the better his chances of paying the rent.

Well, that coffin trimmer, according to that, deserved to be prosecuted. He is emotionally overbalanced and has not learned to control his reactions. However funny the joke might have been, he should have groaned and not laughed. He should have contemplated that this is a crêpe-hanging age; that collectively and individually we wish to be considered a people not to be taken lightly, but as true crêpe-hangers; nor at any time are we to be made fun of. Those who wish to laugh should buy a ticket that will take them into the heart of darkest Africa or one of the highest peaks of the Andes—which are South American mountains and not a brand of college clothes.

So, what to do, if a Wise Providence fitted you out with a cheerful temperament and a wise man tells you that you have the happy faculty of injecting into your dramas those humorous sidelights that make life worth living, which he claims are an asset to a literary career? What to do? Sounds as though he didn't know his literary kumquats. If you write a story that is humorous, the typesetter is liable to have ye ed pinched for shoving along a yarn that makes him laugh; and even if the typesetter sets it up in print, the copy reader or the magazine reader may get pinched for laughing at the damned thing. And, as for the author, he may get shot, quartered, and boiled in oil, his property, if any, confiscated, his wife thrown into jail, and his children sent into a chain gang to help build roads over which people with long pans will rush at top speed in four directions; all going nowhere and in a tremendous rush to get there, trailing streamers of crêpe behind them, like true 100% Americans.

Well, what's the answer? Are we to become a a race of crêpe-hangers and cynics, or are we going to keep smiling, and even laugh occasionally? Laugh right out loud, I mean; a real hearty laugh that makes the stagnant blood circulate and is a better tonic than any chemical formula, including castor oil, advertised in any book, newspaper, or blurbed into a radio mike. For health's sake, let's have more laughter, even if we get jailed for it; and we can laugh in jail and they can't do any worse than throw us into another jail for laughing in the first jail, and the second jail would, no doubt, be no worse than the first jail. Makes no difference how thin you slice it; a jail is still a jail, and no more.

Weep and the world weeps with you; laugh and get pinched.

Sadly and poignantly yours,

—FRANK J. SCHINDLER, 2220 S. Elmwood Ave., Berwyn, Ill., populated by sad people, and inhabited by one recalcitrant. Ye-ah, they call me Hank; but when you say *that*, smile! I can't . . .

The Horsethief

"Dude Daley from Pecos County,
  On Midnight!" . . . They swung the gate
And slipped off the outlaw's blindfold:
  His eyes were twin hells of hate.

He soared, and landed stiff-legged;
  Crowhopped, sunfished, and whirled:
Ten hundred pounds of devil,
  Wise to each trick in the world!

Dude sat him close for a minute,
A centaur, if one ever rode;
Then, he lost the swing of those pitches
And flashes of daylight showed.

He was game. He never pulled leather:
Rode straight, clean, hard, till he fell.
My gun was out when he tumbled:
Midnight was meaner than hell;

Had killed two riders, they told me,
—before he belonged to me—
Pawed them to ragged ribbons,
And I didn't want it three.

Then, just as he poised for striking,
Just as I raised my gun,
Dude lifted himself on his elbow—
Don't ask me how it was done—

And, low voiced, he called out something:
Whatever it was he said,
The stallion got quiet as a brood-mare,
Shame-faced, and hung his head!

Then, after the show was over,
"What's the chance for a trade?"
But Dude didn't have the dinero
To meet the price that I made.

Two seasons I'd owned the outlaw:
Bought cheap, but I held him high.
"Cash, and cash only, Daley"—
He looked half ready to cry.

Next morning my foreman called me:
He had the sheriff along;
Dude, handcuffed; and Midnight, saddled:
I saw there was something bad wrong.

"We got him dead for hoss-stealin';
Caught him not ten miles away.
He won't say a word, but there's others
That'll have a plenty to say!"

The sheriff grinned as he told it:
(Something inside me turned sick.)
"Hosses was always his weakness;
Why, over on Crooked Crick

"Three years ago come August,
He shot a fellow down
For whippin' a hoss a little
While he was away in town."

"A *little?* He used a trace-chain!"
But the sheriff laughed and spat:
"Well, you're goin' to swing for *this* job,
If you did skin out of that!"

I walked up closer to Midnight:
Old scars on the satin skin!
It was all like a jig-saw puzzle,
But I fitted the pieces in.

The way that the horse had acted,
That offer I wouldn't take,
Those scars, and the sheriff's story,
Dude's play, with his life for a stake,

All fitted . . . A dozen punchers
Came pounding up at a lope:
"You're just in time for the hangin',"
Said the sheriff, "Get out a rope!"

There are times when a lie in the balance
Weighs well, when the truth weighs light:
I lied.
"Turn him loose," I said, "Mister Sheriff:
I sold him that horse last night!"

—COURTNEY MCCURDY

Fable

ONCE upon a time there was a small boy of great promise, a ripe watermelon in a backyard patch, and a rotund, choleric German—owner of said patch. It is needless to dwell upon the painful incident which occurred when these three got together, for shortly afterward the rotund German died. Natural causes, probably hastened by Pilsner . . .

The small boy of great promise clenched his fists. His one last chance to retaliate! That night he took off the back wheel of his Pullman-B, dissected the coaster brake, and drew therefrom twelve small nickeled spheres—ball-bearings.

There was a funeral at the German's house; much singing, weeping and beer. The coffin was closed. Six strong men raised it aloft, perspiring a little through their white gloves. They started out—to the front gallery—*toward* the waiting hearse . . .

I am shocked to record the tragic fact that the trip was not completed exactly as planned. In some manner unexplained

twelve shining little balls had been balanced, ready to roll, just at the top of the four wooden stairs . . . and there were seven heavy men, not to mention the coffin of silver and golden oak . . .

It still seems to me that the small boy of great promise never received his just reward. True enough, in due course a horrified parent wore out a perfectly good cowhide belt . . . and the s.b.o.g.p. was saved from Reform School only because his father owned a pacing horse by Star Pointer out of Lady Belle, and a certain military academy in Wisconsin accepted youths of non-military age . . .

But the s.b.o.g.p. never became a great humorist, not even a great poet. Perhaps the spark of genius was spanked to extinction by that cowhide belt. That is sad indeed; but perhaps some day he will achieve the immortality he deserves. An Arthur Guiterman or an Edgar Guest will write a poem. In diamond type below the caption will appear this dedication:

Acknowledgments to the s.b.o.g.p., the only human being who ever discovered a rhyme for, or got any fun out of—the impromptu profession of pallbearing . . .

—TALBOT SHORT

World Law

AT THE MOMENT of this writing (June 21st, 1929) a young man is strutting about Paris, posing as a hero. He stowed away on a transatlantic plane run by three gallant Frenchmen. By so doing he replaced three cubic feet of gasoline, approximately the amount which had to be dumped at the take-off, in order to prevent a smash-up such as happened to Fonck's ill-fated ship.

Also, this "hero" chose to place his additional weight exactly where it would *not* be placed by any sane aviator—in the fuselage. Fortunately for all, the lack of balance did not murder three good aviators, though it caused them to curtail their transatlantic trip and land in Spain to re-fuel. But the principle is exactly the same; whether from ignorance or recklessness or whatnot, young Schreiber came near committing a triple murder and suicide.

New York City has done handsomely in meeting and welcoming all of America's returning heroes, and some others. For myself I hope that Mr. Whalen, Mr. Walker and the rest of the glad-hand organization this time will make a distinction; will read a public censure to this heedless young squirt. And I hope that the major countries of the world will unite in passing a law holding criminally liable any person who stows away aboard an airship. The time will come when this law may be moderated, of course—but that will be when the hazards of air travel have been reduced materially; when it is as safe, let us say, to cross the ocean by air as it now is to buzz along by automobile half a day at fifty miles an hour. Youngsters now carefully memorizing their geometric axioms, probably will know this, and wonder why those "old chaps of 1929" were so thrilled by the danger of flying.

This world-distributed magazine tries its very best to stand back of every *genuine* tilt man takes with the universe; and that is just why in my opinion, such folly as Schreiber's has to be squelched. When good men, employing every scientific precaution possible—then going beyond that to gamble their lives and the happiness of those who love them—can be thwarted, perhaps killed out of hand just because some adolescent nincompoop desires a thrill (or because some barred alien or escaping criminal wants to cross a national border), it is time for all true adventurers to rise up and smite.

I suggest, however, that this law be made for three years or five years only, then renewed as needed. Otherwise the world conceivably might have on its hands something worse than the notorious Mann Act of the United States, for many years an instrument of blackmail.

Meanwhile, I hope that the parents of young Schreiber own a good, stout trunk-strap—plus the common sense and muscles to apply it.

The Adventure of Speech

RIGHT now I have a family of youngsters who are afflicted with a new epidemic of throaty noises and grunts and growls—some of which mean yes or no, delight, hate, or indetermination. "*Yop!*" "*Yuss!*" "*Um-m-m-ah.*" "*Nope.*" "*Wumph!*"

That ensemble goes all the way from enthusiasm to disdain; these noises are the ones I have learned. There are many more that puzzle me; a father usually is twenty-five years too late in trying to learn a new lingo, I think. But I'm trying.

Seems to me that the human race often has its linguistic mouth full, or the members thereof are just plain lazy and content. Speech is briefed. Slang is used, and some grunts. Well, why not? If every great man talked as Einstein writes —or as Horatio Alger, Jr., wrote, for that matter—we'd all still be trying to understand the marvel of the motorcycle. Or maybe even the carbon filament lamp . . .

I'll bet anyone three cents cash that Alexander the Great did not talk in the flowery periods attributed to him; that Cleopatra purred—and maybe giggled a little in flattery—when she had another lover to poison; that Leif the lucky and Harold Fairhair growled inarticulately in their throats; that Le Valliere sighed; that Voltaire wheezed and snorted through his nose; and that even a modern, cultured hero like Mussolini or Herb Hoover or Abd El Krim or Ramsay Macdonald has had his tired moments when he said, "Nope, oh shucks!" (or foreign words to that effect) when confronted with another inescapable conference . . . or a political appointment.

I am at odds with lots of dictionaries, both on spelling and on usage of words. I try to be as plain and understandable as a grizzly on a mountain trail—though 188° Fahrenheit more friendly. And I believe in two stages of speech or writing.

1. A solid grounding in good English of the past.
2. Development, modernity and pithiness.

After that it's every man for himself. Some writers, speakers, editors and readers go into the ruck, are lost forever. Some others develop, even become great. Personalities aside, it does appear to me that a Ruskin or a Pater might have trouble finding a publisher today. In their own period they were masters, too.

However, listen to Comrade Richardson, who is responsible for *Adventure's yuh*-eradicator . . .

If nothing more exciting is before the house, may I offer for consideration a reform in the matter of *uh-uh, uh-huh, huh-huh* and all their variations? New and ingenious forms appear frequently. I saw *unh-hunh* not long ago. Some writers seem to love these inventions.

Now the hardship on the reader is that there is no way to tell what they mean. It seems likely that they are intended to represent the grunts by which, from earliest childhood, we signify agreement or dissent; but there is no clue to which is which. They are all quite unpronounceable, I think.

I do recall that this matter was discussed, one day a great many years ago, by a group of children of low school age playing in Pa Sower's cob-pile, and the conclusion was reached that the grunt for Yes was rightfully spelled *m-hm*, and that for No, *hmp-m*. The years that have passed have not brought me any conflicting evidence. How does it appear to you? Would *m-hm* and *hmp-m* add intolerably to the proof-readers' burden?

One thing I have often wondered, and I think the readers of *Adventure*, who have been everywhere and know everything, could answer it if they would; are these grunts peculiar to our own race or country, or are they a remnant of primitive speech and common to all mankind?

—A. T. RICHARDSON, Warren, Ark.

I might add that the alternative forms favored by the more catarrhal members of the Cob-Pile Conference were *ng-hng* and *hngk-ng*. These are equally accurate but were objected to as too high-brow.

Any time a story in *Adventure* puzzles any reader, please ask me—or tell me why. All of us here, who wield the blue pencils, take pride in the plain fact that most men, from sixth-grade-graduates to ultimate doctors of letters, *do* understand and enjoy our yarns.

—ANTHONY M. RUD

Ask Adventure

For free information and services you can't get elsewhere

R. C. M. P.

THEIR posts are far flung throughout the North West Territories.

Request:—"To what extent do the Mounted cover the N. W. Territory? Attention to the islands north of Melville Sound. What is the extent and organization of these troops? Authority? Term of enlistment? Training? Headquarters?"

—F. B. THOMSON, San Diego, California.

Reply, by Mr. Patrick E. Lee:—The Royal Canadian Mounted Police is charged with enforcing all laws, local and federal, in the North West Territories. The number of posts is increasing every year, particularly on the Arctic coast and the islands farther north.

"G" Division, with headquarters in Edmonton (Alberta), has charge of posts in the Mackenzie River valley, with sub-headquarters at Great Slave Lake and Aklavik.

"F" Division, with headquarters at Prince Albert (Saskatchewan), has charge of posts on the western side of Hudson Bay, at Chesterfield Inlet and Port Nelson.

Headquarters Division in Ottawa controls the posts on the Arctic islands, at Pangnirtung and Pond's Inlet (Baffin Land), at Dundas Harbor (North Devon Island) and at Bache Peninsula (Ellesmere Land).

There is also a post at Port Burwell, at the mouth of Hudson Straits, on the Northern Quebec side. Recently posts have been established on Victoria Land and on Coronation Gulf. There are no posts on Melville or the Parry Islands as yet.

Recruits must be unmarried British subjects between the ages of 18 and 32, at least 5 feet 8 inches tall, of good health and physique. They should be able to ride and be able to take care of horses, but this is not absolutely necessary. Enlistment is for three years. Pay $2 a day with maintenance. Training, from three to six months at Regina (Saskatchewan). Application should be made to the Commissioner, R. C. M. Police, Ottawa.

Malay Archipelago

IN THE interior of some of the islands, the natives still indulge their taste for man-eating and head-hunting.

Request:—"1. What is the state of civilization among the natives of Papua, Solomons and New Hebrides? Are they still in a cannibal or savage state, and is travel difficult because of these conditions?

2. Are passports necessary for travel in these islands? Is it possible to secure work with a trading firm or plantation? Could I secure work on a trading schooner? I have an A. B. degree from a university and can speak some French and German.

3. Do many windjammers ply between South Sea ports, the islands, and England?

4. Are there many colorful characters around the

islands, such as retired sea captains, missionaries, traders, or even beachcombers that could be interviewed for feature articles for newspapers and magazines? I want to take this trip for the express purpose of gathering such material."

—ARCHIBALD B. OLIVER, Lawrence, Kansas, U. S. A.

Reply, by Mr. L. P. B. Armit:—Your queries relative to the Solomons, Papua, and the New Hebrides have been sent along to me by Mr. Foley, with a request that I endeavor to reply to them direct. You have given a large order, but here goes:

1. The aboriginal inhabitants of Papua, Solomons and New Hebrides are still in the neolithic or stone age, which, of course, means that all the nasty customs of such savages prevail. Cannibalism is practised in both the Solomons and New Hebrides; in Papua it is only in evidence in the few areas in the far interior that have not yet been brought under government control; but in the neighboring territories of New Guinea (the former German section) and Dutch New Guinea, the old and very unpleasant customs of man-eating, head-hunting, etc., still continue.

Travel in Papua is not exactly easy, owing to the rough country—Papua is said to be the most mountainous part of the world—but except in the far interior the traveler is not in danger from the natives if he walks warily and behaves himself. In the other two territories, the coastal part is fairly safe, but interior trips are only possible for armed parties; this, of course, does not refer to parts where the government has full control, such as the goldfields, etc.

2. I can not say what is necessary in the Solomons or the New Hebrides, but in Papua anybody can blow along who has a passport (if from a foreign country), or if he is an Australian he requires nothing beyond sufficient cash to keep him going during his stay, if not coming to a job, or pay his fare back to Australia. Consult the nearest British Consulate and you'll probably ascertain the passport regulations for the Solomons and New Hebrides, as both colonies (New Hebrides is a condominium, France and Great Britain sharing the government) are under the British Colonial Office. So far as securing a job is concerned, I can only speak for Papua, where jobs are few and far between, as most of the men employed on the plantation, etc., are imported from Australia or England.

3. No sailing vessels ply between Papua and the other islands; all oversea communication is by the B. P. Line of mail steamers, which run a three-weekly service from Sydney, Australia. The same firm runs service from Sydney to the Solomons and the New Hebrides. The French also have a steamer service between Noumea (New Caledonia) and various ports in the New Hebrides. At intervals tramp steamers (British, American, etc.) call at Papua and the Solomons, etc., for copra cargoes.

4. Yes, you could find dozens of men who would be only too pleased to secure a listener for their torrid tales of blood, piracy, savagery, etc. And a lot of these taletellers speak the truth. I should say you'd get stacks of material for copy, but you'd have to walk softly and get some corroboration, for Pacific Islanders are notorious leg-pullers. The tales some of those nice old gentlemen put over would choke a donkey; but, if you don't look too eager, you usually collect something worth putting on paper. The indirect way is the best, for lots of these old boys get shy if they discover you're pumping 'em for an article.

To top off the foregoing I suggest you amble along to your nearest library and browse in the Pacific Island, New Guinea and Netherland Indies sections, for you'll dig up a great deal of useful information in that way.

Motor Car

A FEW words on the economy of engines at varying speeds.

Request: — "The writer would appreciate very much an answer to the following question:

An automobile traveling in high gear over a ten-mile stretch at ten miles an hour.

The same car covering the same ten miles in high at fifty miles per hour.

Does it use more or less gas per mile going at fifty miles per hour, than it does going at ten miles per hour and why?"

—FREDERIC L. ROBERTS, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Edward B. Neil:—Every internal combustion engine of the type used in automobiles has a certain speed and load at which it operates most economically. The economical engine speed for most engines is usually around 900 to 1000 revolutions per minute, but the most economical load, on the other hand, is comparatively high; or, in other words, near the point of maximum output of the engine. Hence it is necessary to balance the speed against the load to determine the most economical operating ratio between the two.

Insofar as performance of the engine in a car is concerned, there are three particular factors influencing economy of operation, the first being the one mentioned above, the second that of friction, and the third that of wind resistance. These three, of course, do not take into consideration the condition of the road, which is an additional factor, but I assume that the car in question is to be run over the same road in both cases. From an engineering standpoint, knowing the make of car, size of engine, type of body, and other details of a similar character, it is possible to calculate the most economical operating speed, and it may also be determined readily by laboratory test.

In general, however, it may be taken for granted that the car operating in high gear will be most economical at the lower speed, in this case 10 miles per hour, for even though the engine were not itself operating most economically, the factors of car and tire friction and wind resistance at the higher speed

would offset any slight difference insofar as the engine itself is concerned.

The most economical speed for cars on the American market today is usually in the range of from about 15 to 25 miles per hour, for at this point engine conditions are at best, and the factors of friction and wind resistance have not yet reached sufficiently high proportions to offset the gain in running at the most economical engine speed. Sometimes the difference between running at medium and high speed is comparatively small except where wind resistance becomes important. Usually this becomes a factor at speeds above 45 miles per hour, and it is, of course, the reason why racing cars are carefully streamlined, since at 100 miles an hour or more it is a very large item, oftentimes consuming three-fourths or more of the engine power.

To briefly summarize the above in reply to your letter, it can be safely stated that a car going at 50 miles per hour will consume more gasoline per mile than one going at 10 miles per hour.

Military

THREE World War personages.

Request:—"Would you kindly answer the three following questions for me?

1. Who was chief of the A. E. F. Air Service?

2. Was Captain 'Eddie' Rickenbacker America's leading ace?

3. Was Sir John French England's Chief of Staff?"—STUART K. CHAMBERS, Webster, Mass.

Reply, by Capt. Glen R. Townsend:—1. Major General Mason M. Patrick was Chief of the Air Service in the A. E. F.

2. Captain E. V. Rickenbacker is America's leading World War ace. Captain Rickenbacker was officially credited with twenty-five victories, 21 against enemy airplanes and four against enemy balloons.

3. Sir John French was Great Britain's chief of staff, but not during the World War. He was Chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1912 to April, 1914. In August, 1914, he was given command of the British army on the Western Front. In December, 1915, he was replaced by Sir Douglas Haig and became commander-in-chief in the United Kingdom. Early in 1918 he became Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland.

Water Sports

SURF boards and aquaplanes.

Request:—"Is it possible to use a surf board in aquaplaning behind a speed boat?"

—PAUL FAXON, N. Y. City, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. George W. Sutton:—I would not advise the purchase of a surf board to use in aquaplaning behind a speed boat. The surf board is designed for riding on the crest of a wave with only the motion of the water for its motive power. It is therefore especially shaped to fit these forces. An aquaplane is much shorter in length and equipped with guide ropes. It makes a much faster vehicle when towed. The performance on either a surf board or an aquaplane when towed by a speed boat will vary according to where the weight is placed.

Inasmuch as each of these is designed for a special purpose you will get better results by using them only in the way for which they are constructed.

Rifles

SOMETHING about .22 repeaters.

Request:—"I am going on a somewhat extended cruise among the Florida Keys and the Bahama Islands and will appreciate your advice on a .22 caliber repeating rifle. A first class gun using shorts, longs and long rifle cartridges is desirable.

1. Do you know of any repeating rifle using the above cartridges that can be used as a single shot with the .22 W. R. F. cartridges?

2. What is your opinion of the Marlin No. 39 and from whom may descriptive matter be obtained?

3. What make of ammunition of the above type would you select for your own use? What is the action and effect of the 'hollow nosed' long rifle cartridge?

4. What is your opinion of the so-called anti-trust ammunition?"

—A. I. V. WILSON, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—1. No rifle using the .22 short, long or long rifle, will also use the .22 W. R. F., as the diameter of the latter is greater, due to the inside lubricated bullet, and the overall length is greater, due to the greater powder capacity. So I fear you will have to either secure a repeater for one or the other of the two designs of ammunition and stick to it. Incidentally, it's very poor practice to mix cartridges of different sizes in the same rifle, as far as effect on the chamber of the arm goes, in my opinion.

2. The Marlin Model 39 is one of the best .22 repeaters obtainable today; it's my pet gun, or rather one of my two pets, standing beside me as I type this. Secure information from The Marlin Firearms Corp., New Haven, Conn.

3. All of the following makes of ammunition are excellent, as far as I can determine by my personal tests, and it only remains to experiment and determine just what one fits and "suits" your rifle best: UMC., U. S., Peters, or Western.

The killing effect of the hollowpoint bullet makes it a great deal better for game than the solid point, as the tearing and mutilating effect is much greater.

4. I have found the new varieties of anti-rusting ammunition in the above makes perfectly satisfactory, and I've tested them for three years past. Even the centerfire loads are equally desirable, I find. Just clean your rifle well with hot water or good nitro-solvent before using them, and then never use the old sort of cartridges again, and you'll be all right.

See next page for list of *Ask Adventure* experts.

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing *Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting and bait camping-outfits; fishing-trips.*—JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care *Adventure.*

Small Boating *Skiff, outboard small launch river and lake tripping and cruising.*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Inglewood, California.

Canoeing *Paddling, sailing, cruising; equipment and accessories, clubs, organizations, official meetings, regattas.*—EDGAR S. PERKINS, Copeland Manor, Libertyville. Illinois.

Yachting HENRY W. RUBINKAM, Chicago Yacht Club, Box 507, Chicago, Ill.

Motor Boating GEORGE W. SUTTON, 232 Madison Ave., Room 801, New York City.

Motor Camping JOHN D. LONG, 610 W. 116th St., New York City.

Motor Vehicles *Operation, legislative restrictions and Traffic.*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care *Adventure.*

Automotive and Aircraft Engines *Design, operation and maintenance.*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care *Adventure.*

All Shotguns *including foreign and American makes; wing shooting.* JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care *Adventure.*

All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers *including foreign and American makes.*—DONEGAN WIGGINS, R. F. D. 3 Box 75, Salem, Ore.

Edged Weapons, *pole arms and armor.*—ROBERT E. GARDNER, 835 Gladden Road, Grandview, Columbus, Ohio.

First Aid on the Trail *Medical and surgical emergency care, wounds, injuries, common illnesses, diet, pure water, clothing, insect and snake bite; industrial first aid and sanitation for mines, logging camps, ranches and exploring parties as well as for camping trips of all kinds. First-aid outfits. Health hazard of the outdoor life, arctic, temperate and tropical zones.*—CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D., Falls City, Neb.

Health-Building Outdoors *How to get well and how to keep well in the open air, where to go and how to travel, right exercise, food and habits, with as much adaptation as possible to particular cases.*—CLAUDE P. FORDYCE.

Hiking CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D., Falls City, Neb.

Camping and Woodcraft HORACE KEPHART, Bryson City, N. C.

Mining and Prospecting *Territory anywhere on the continent of North America. Questions on mines, mining law, mining, mining methods or practise; where and how to prospect; how to outfit; how to make the mine after it is located; how to work it and how to sell it; general geology necessary for miner or prospector, including the precious and base metals and economic minerals such as pitchblende or uranium, gypsum, mica, cryolite, etc.*—VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

Forestry in the United States *Big-game hunting, guides and equipment; national forests of the Rocky Mountain States. Questions on the policy of the Government regarding game and wild animal life in the forests.*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

Tropical Forestry *Tropical forests and forest products; their economic possibilities; distribution, exploration, etc.*—WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, Haitian Agricultural Corporation, Cap-Haitien, Haiti.

Railroading in the U. S., Mexico and Canada *General office, especially immigration, work; advertising work, duties of station agent, bill clerk, ticket agent, passenger brakeman and rate clerk. General Information.*—R. T. NEWMAN, P. O. Drawer 368, Anaconda, Mont.

Army Matters, United States and Foreign CAPTAIN GLEN R. TOWNSEND, Fort Snelling, Minn.

Navy Matters *Regulations, history, customs, drill, gunnery; tactical and strategic questions, ships, propulsion, construction, classification; general information. Questions regarding the enlisted personnel and officers except such as contained in the Register of Officers can not be answered. Maritime law.*—LIEUT. FRANCIS GREENE, U. S. N. R., 231 Eleventh St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

U. S. Marine Corps LIEUT. F. W. HOPKINS, 507 No. Harper, Hollywood, Cal.

Aviation *Airplanes; airships; airways and landing fields; contests; Aero Clubs; insurance; laws; licenses; operating data; schools; foreign activities; publications. No questions on stock promotion.*—LIEUTENANT JEFFREY R. STARKS, 1408 "N" Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

State Police FRANCIS H. BENT, JR., 117 North Boulevard, Deland, Fla.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police PATRICK LEE, c/o William H. Souls, 1481 Beacon St., Boston, Massachusetts.

Horses *Care, breeding, training of horses in general; hunting, jumping, and polo; horses of the old and new West.*—THOMAS H. DAMERON, 7 Block "S", Pueblo, Colo.

Dogs JOHN B. THOMPSON, care *Adventure.*

American Anthropology North of the Panama Canal *Customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions.*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Cal.

Taxidermy SETH BULLOCK, care *Adventure.*

Herpetology *General information concerning reptiles and amphibians; their customs, habits and distribution.*—CLIFFORD H. POPE, American Museum of Natural History, New York, N. Y.

Entomology *General information about insects and spiders; venomous insects, disease-carrying insects, insects attacking man, etc.*—DR. FRANK E. LUTZ, Ramsey, N. J.

Ichthyology GEORGE S. MYERS, Stanford University, Box 821, Calif.

Stamps H. A. DAVIS, The American Philatelic Society, 3421 Colfax Ave., Denver, Colo.

Coins and Medals HOWLAND WOOD, American Numismatic Society, Broadway at 156th St., New York City.

Radio *Telegraphy, telephony, history, broadcasting, apparatus, invention, receiver construction, portable sets.*—DONALD MCNICOL, 132 Union Road, Roselle Park, N. J.

Photography *Information on outfitting and on work in out-of-the-way places. General information.*—PAUL L. ANDERSON, 36 Washington St., East Orange, New Jersey.

Linguistics and Ethnology (*a*) *Racial and tribal tradition, history and psychology; folklore and mythology.* (*b*) *Languages and the problems of race migration, national development and descent (authorities and bibliographies).* (*c*) *Individual languages and language-families; interrelation of tongues, their affinities and plans for their study.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, 345 W. 23rd St., New York City.

Old Songs That Men Have Sung ROBERT W. GORDON, care of *Adventure.*

Track JACKSON SCHOLZ, 73 Farmington Ave., Longmeadow, Mass.

Tennis FRED HAWTHORNE, Sports Dept., New York *Herald Tribune*, New York City.

Basketball JOE F. CARR, 16 E. Broad St., Columbus, Ohio.

Bicycling ARTHUR J. LEAMOND, 469 Valley St., South Orange, New Jersey.

Swimming LOUIS DEB. HANDLEY, 260 Washington St., N. Y. C.

Skating FRANK SCHREIBER, 2226 Clinton Ave., Berwyn, Ill.

Skiing and Snowshoeing W. H. PRICE, 3436 Mance St., Montreal, Quebec.

Hockey "DANIEL," *The Evening Telegram*, 73 Dey St., New York City.

Archery EARL B. POWELL, 524 West 3rd St., Los Angeles, Cal.

Boxing JAMES P. DAWSON, The New York *Times*, Times Square, New York City.

Fencing JOHN V. GROMBACH, 1061 Madison Ave., New York City.

The Sea Part 1 *American Waters.* Also ships, seamen, shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, small boat sailing; commercial fisheries of North America.—HARRY E. RIESEBERG, Apt. 504, 2115 F Street N. W., Washington, D. C.

The Sea Part 2 *Statistics and records of American shipping; names, tonnages, dimensions, service, crews, owners of all American documented steam, motor, sail, yacht and unrigged merchant vessels. Vessels lost, abandoned, sold to aliens and all Government owned vessels.*—HARRY E. RIESEBERG.

The Sea Part 3 *British Waters.* Also old-time sailoring.—CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care *Adventure.*

The Sea Part 4 *Atlantic and Indian Oceans; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits; Islands and Coasts.* (See also West Indian Sections.)—CAPT. DINGLE, care *Adventure.*

The Sea Part 5 *The Mediterranean; Islands and Coasts.*—CAPT. DINGLE, care *Adventure.*

The Sea Part 6 *Arctic Ocean* (*Siberian Waters*).—CAPT. C. L. OLIVER, care *Adventure.*

Hawaii DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

South Sea Islands JAMES STANLEY MEAGHER, 4322 Pine Street, Inglewood, Calif.

Philippine Islands BUCK CONNOR, Universal City, California.

Borneo CAPT. BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, care *Adventure.*

★**New Guinea** *Questions regarding the policy of the Government or proceedings of Government officers not answered.*—L. P. B. ARMIT, Port Moresby, Territory of Papua, via Sydney, Australia.

★**New Zealand, Cook Islands, Samoa.** TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand.

★**Australia and Tasmania** ALAN FOLEY, 18a Sandridge Street, Bondi, Sydney, Australia.

Asia Part 1 *Siam, Andamans, Malay Straits, Straits Settlements, Shan States and Yunnan.*—GORDON MACCREAGH, 21 East 14th St., New York.

Asia Part 2 *Annam, Laos, Cambodia, Tongking, Cochin China.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Asia Part 3 *Southern and Eastern China.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Asia Part 4 *Western China, Burma, Tibet.*—CAPT. BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, care *Adventure.*

★**Asia Part 5** *Northern China and Mongolia.*—GEORGE W. TWOMEY, M.D., U. S. Veteran's Hospital, Fort Snelling, Minn., and DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Asia Part 6 *Japan.*—SIDNEY HERSCHEL SMALL, San Rafael, Calif., and OSCAR E. RILEY, 4 Huntington Ave., Scarsdale, New York.

Asia Part 7 *Persia, Arabia.*—CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, care *Adventure.*

Asia Minor.—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 1 *Egypt.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

✠**Africa Part 2** *Sudan.*—W. T. MOFFAT, Opera House, Southport, Lancashire, England.

Africa Part 3 *Tripoli. Including the Sahara, Tuaregs, caravan trade and caravan routes.*—CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 4 *Tunis and Algeria.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 5 *Morocco.*—GEORGE E. HOLT, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 6 *Sierra Leone to Old Calabar, West Africa, Southern and Northern Nigeria.*—W. C. COLLINS, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 7 *Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Natal, Zululand, Transvaal and Rhodesia.*—CAPTAIN F. J. FRANKLIN, Mortimer Park, Santa Susana, California.

✠**Africa Part 8** *Portuguese East.*—R. G. WARING, 14837 Grand River Ave., Detroit, Michigan.

South America Part 1 *Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile.*—EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure.*

South America Part 2 *Venezuela, the Guianas, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentine and Brazil.*—PAUL VANORDEN SHAW, 457 W. 123rd St., New York, N. Y.

West Indies *Cuba, Isle of Pines, Haiti, Santo Domingo, Porto Rico, Virgin and Jamaica Groups.*—CHARLES BELL EMERSON, Adventure Cabin, Orlando, Florida.

Central America *Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala.*—CHARLES BELL EMERSON, Adventure Cabin, Orlando, Florida.

Mexico Part 1 *Northern. Border States of old Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex.

Mexico Part 2 *Southern, Lower California; Mexico south of a line from Tampico to Mazatlan.*—C. R. MAHAFFEY, Coyocutena Farm College, La Libertad, Comayagua, Honduras.

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